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Short Stories

Twice A Month

In Canada

SEPT 25th 25¢

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TIGER CLAWS

by Frank L. Packard

THE SHORTHORN KID

by Hugh Pendexter

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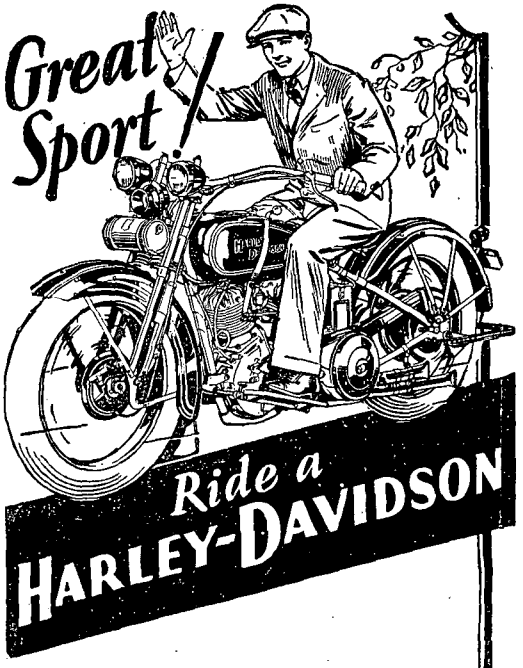

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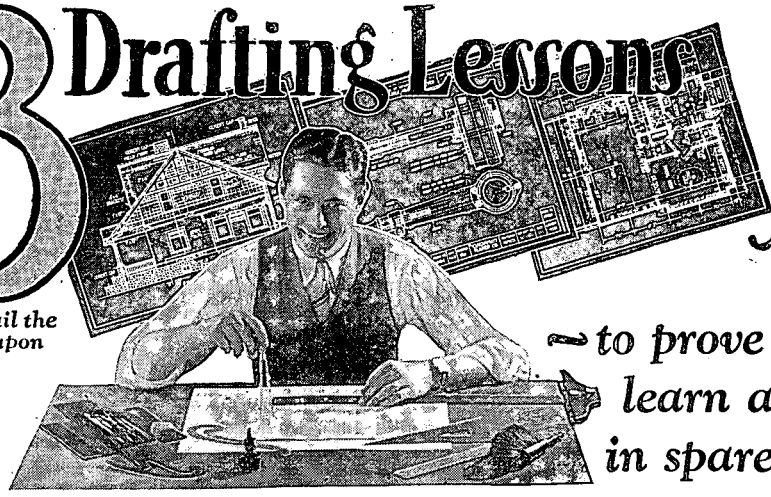

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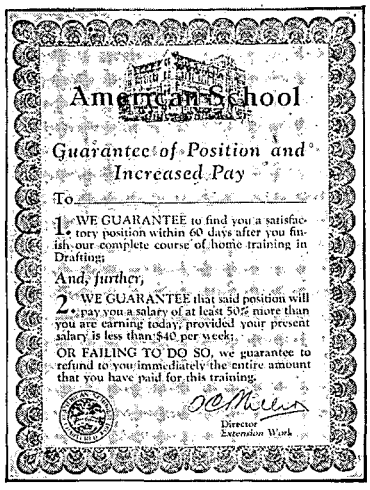
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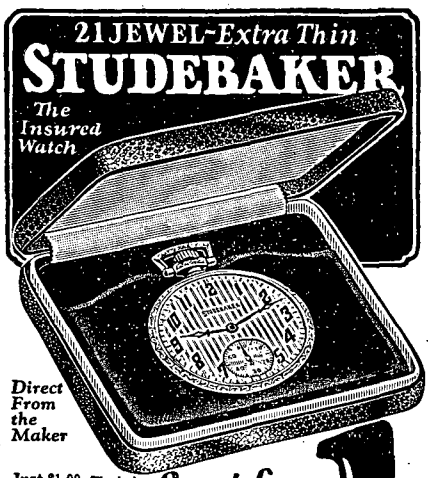

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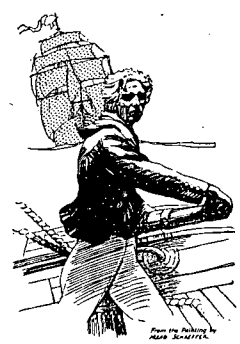

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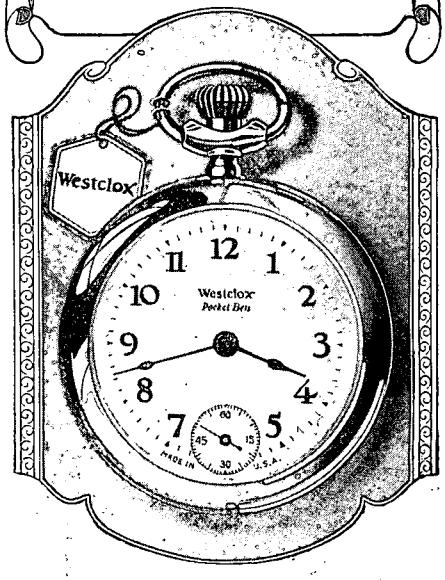

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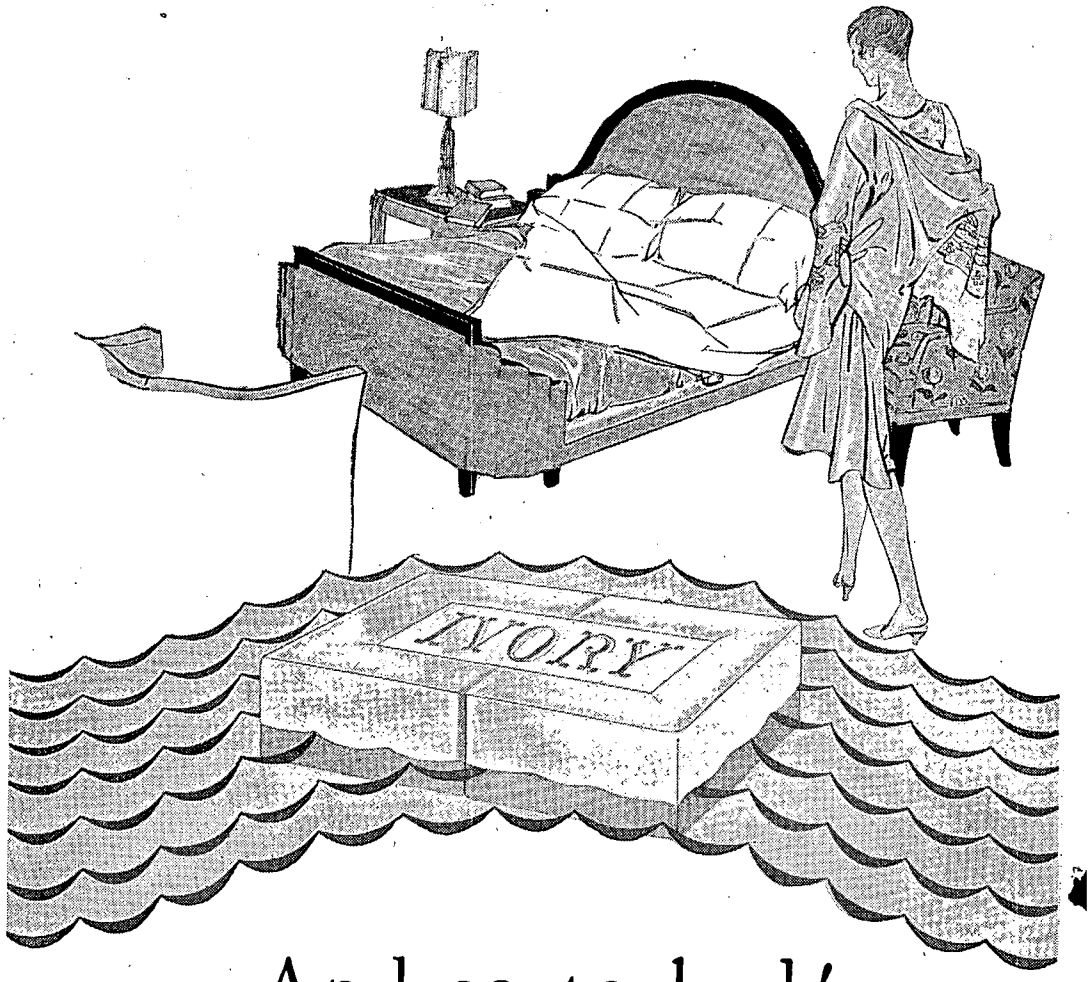

And so to bed!

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This is sweet content . . . to slip into soft warmth that comes like a blanket up to the chin. How easy to spin the golden moments while Ivory drifts near your lazy hand! Slowly and luxuriantly you cover yourself with crests of Ivory foam. Then, down in the water again to let the cleansing bubbles rinse quickly away!

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Short Stories

Vol. CXXIV, No. 6 — Whole No. 546

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR — D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

A BUNKHOUSE HOWLER

IT WAS evening in the bunkhouse. The lights were lit and four or five of the waddies were playing seven card stud in one corner while Hank Hardrock stood and looked on. Suddenly a young fellow sat up in his bunk, and shouted, "Fer the love o' Mike, can't you jaspers get to bed? Here I'm workin' all day wrastlin' cow critters an' at night I gotta lie on a hard bunk an' bruise my bones while I listen to a lot o' rangy ranahans take away each other's money." The cowpunchers sort of grinned and went on playing, but Hank Hardrock looked up at the kid and said, "You musta fallen into some disrepute, boy, when a herd o' poker-playin' cowpokes won't even take the trouble to turn around an' cuss yuh out. Now you lay yoreself down an' learn how to do some sleepin'. Or else go herd sheep where there won't never be nobody to disturb yuh, no time."

Later as we sat on the bunkhouse steps he said:

"I'd shore have to give that hombre his time if he wasn't such a high powered cow-nurse, an' I ain't decided even yet whether the game is worth the flashlight. Ever'thin' he does, he does it complainin'. He ain't learned the fundamental lesson of the West. It's a hard country, an' it weren't made fer you, ner yet fer cow critters. The cattle were put on the land an' they stay there by the hard work an' sweat o' their nurses. Yuh gotta be plumb shore that nothin's goin' to be just like yuh hone to have it out here, but if yo're the right kind of hombre yuh'll find after a while that it's the best dang country ever made. An' one o' the chief reasons is that it puts a man on his mettle. He has to make his work, his play, and his self with his two hands. An' I guess it's the same everywhere. Yuh never find things to yore likin' onless yuh make 'em that way."

THE EDITOR.

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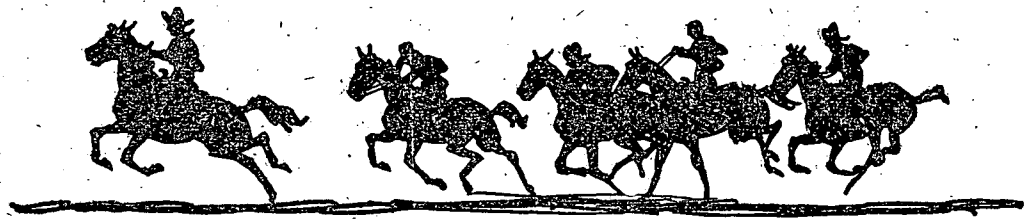

Me an' Shorty

A complete novel of the JC range and a couple of enterprising cowpokes

by

CLARENCE E. MULFORD

also

ERNEST HAYCOX
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TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

SEPTEMBER 25th 1928

TIGER CLAWS

By FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of "Two Stolen Idols," etc.

A story of the time and haunts of the redoubtable and well remembered Jimmie Dale.

PART I

AN EVIL TRAIL THAT LED FROM A GROTESQUE MURDER ON THE DESOLATE SHORES OF A SOUTH SEA ISLAND TO NEW YORK'S UNDERWORLD, WAS THE TRAIL KEITH WHARTON WAS TO FOLLOW. HIS TASK OF AVENGING HIS BROTHER'S DEATH WAS TO TAKE HIM INTO THE VERY HEART OF THE GANGSTERS' EAST SIDE AND COME AT LAST TO THE SECRET OF THE MYSTERIOUS MAHOGANY BOX

CHAPTER I

THE SIGNAL

WHERE the wind blew and cargo offered, the *Malola* traded. All Polynesia and the Malay Peninsula knew the trim little schooner. Where steam was not profitable, the *Malola* made money. The fly-specks that peppered the charts, nameless isles and atolls over a vast expanse of ocean, which were nothing but a ubiquitous source of worry and anxiety to the navigating officers of more pretentious craft, were, on the other hand, a most lucrative source of income to the *Malola,* and in a large measure responsible for the very comfortable balance that lay to the credit of the two brothers, her owners, in the banks of Sydney, Auckland and Singapore.

For fifteen years and more, Keith and Allan Wharton, Keith being but a nipper of ten in the beginning and Allan twenty-four, had sailed the *Malola,* not only to their financial advantage, but to the earning, as well, of the esteem of all with whom they had dealings—from the lone

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white men who held the outposts of civilization on isles that were scarcely known, and rarely visited, to the merchants who sat in greater comfort in their city offices, and bartered for either a charter or the cargo that the schooner might at the moment have under hatch.

They were tall, bronzed, muscular men, not handsome, but ruggedly good-looking, Keith and Allan Wharton; both clean-shaven, both with clear, gray, steady eyes, and light brown hair—Allan six feet in height, topping his younger brother by perhaps a scant inch. And now, as for the fourth or fifth time they joined each other at the schooner's rail to stare out once more through the darkness to where, a point off the starboard bow, a light persistently flared up and died down at regular intervals, Allan flung a questioning gesture shoreward.

"Well," he demanded, "can you make anything more out of it than before?"

"No, I'm hanged if I can!" Keith replied in a puzzled way. "As we've already said, it's obvious that they spotted us long before twilight, and, knowing we would pass close to the island, they've kept the light showing ever since it grew dark enough to attract our attention. That's clear enough; and also there's no possible doubt about it being a signal. But the whole thing is just as queer as ever it was—unless we're out in our bearings, and I don't see how that could be for we both checked up on the noon observations."

"There's nothing wrong with our bearings," Allan Wharton answered. "The island's down on the chart, though I'll admit you'd need a magnifying glass to see it; furthermore, we expected to rise it by late afternoon even in this light breeze. There's no question about it; it's the same island where we put in for water about a year ago and counted ourselves lucky at finding any in so small a place."

"Right!" said Keith. "I'm sure it is, too; but, of course, that's just what's puzzling us. We stretched our legs ashore there, went all over the island in less than two hours, and there wasn't a living soul on it, or any sign that there ever had been. And now there's a signal fire on the beach."

"Yes; and I'd say they've seen our answer now, for they haven't smothered their blaze for the last few minutes." Allan turned his head, and shouted along the deck. "You needn't swing that lantern any more, Gur Singh!" he ordered. "And stand by to heave-to. We won't go much farther in. If I remember aright, the reefs run a long way out all around the island."

"Yes, sahib," a voice replied out of the darkness.

"It's a bit queer, as you say," resumed Allan Wharton, turning to Keith again, "and I'm getting rather curious about it, though we have both agreed it must be that some poor devils, natives or whites, are in trouble there from some cause or other. I don't suppose there's a chance in a thousand that there has been another vessel here, except their own or whatever they came in, since we were here last. However, we'll hear their story presently. It's luck for them, in any case, that we came along! We'll let Hoka and Taipi row us ashore, and Gur Singh can stay with the schooner."

Keith nodded.

"Yes," he said. "And though the breeze, what little there is of it, is off shore, I think we're close enough in now. It can't be more than a mile, and we're just about abreast of the light. What do you say?"

"All right," agreed Allan Wharton. "See to it, old top!"

THE schooner was smartly hove-to, and the boat lowered. The two Malays, who, with Gur Singh, the East Indian, were more like devoted and faithful friends to Keith and Allan Wharton than anything else, and who for many years had comprised the schooner's entire crew, took their places at the oars, and, leaving Gur Singh aboard, began to row the two brothers toward the shore.

They covered the distance rapidly; but it was not until they were within a hundred yards of the beach that anything was at all distinguishable in the blackness except the signal fire. Then Allan spoke abruptly.

"They've let the fire die down pretty low," he said; "but it seems to me as though I can make out four or five fig-

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ures now standing there at the water's edge."

"Four, I'd say," pronounced Keith, as he stared shoreward. "They've seen us coming, of course, though it's beastly dark. We might as well give them a hail now." He raised his voice. "Beach, ahoy!" he shouted.

A cheer answered him.

"Whites!" said Allan. "There'll be crowded quarters on the *Malola* tonight; but a thankful lot, unless I miss my guess, to be anywhere but here."

Keith nodded by way of answer. He was intent upon the shore now, which was but a matter of a few strokes away. Yes, there were four figures there—four men. As Allan had said, the fire had died down and was now but a glowing lump of embers with an occasional flicker of flame, but, as they stood at the water's edge, the four figures had become distinctly silhouetted against the remaining light, little though it was. They were talking, laughing in an hysterical manner, jumping up and down on the beach like men who, having once abandoned hope, were now crazed and delirious with joy at the certain promise of rescue.

"Poor devils!" Keith muttered, unconsciously repeating Allan's words.

The boat's nose grated on the sand.

KEITH stood up, and, with Allan beside him, began to clamber over the thwarts, as Hoka and Taipi jumped out to pull the boat up on the beach. He smiled then—as both he and Allan nearly lost their balance. Hoka and Taipi might have saved themselves their efforts, and the wetting of their feet! As though fearful of having their means of salvation snatched from them even when it was in sight, the four figures had seized upon the boat's gunwales and had given a concerted tug that jerked the boat up the beach until it was almost clear of the water.

"Here, easy there! Have a heart, you chaps!" Allan laughed out cheerily. "Everything's all right now, and you——"

The short, vicious flame-tongue of a revolver shot stabbed through the darkness—then another, and another. Something hot seared itself across Keith's cheek. He heard Taipi scream. He saw Allan just in front of him fling up his hands, his sentence never finished, and pitch headlong over the bow of the boat on to the sand.

For the space of time it might take a watch to tick Keith's brain was numbed and inactive with shock and surprise; and then, with a distraught and piercing cry that welled up from a soul riven with anguish and fury, he launched himself in a plunging dive from the boat's thwart full at the nearest figure on the sand.

The blaze of a shot blinded him, the heat of it scorched his face, and the bullet winging just above his lowered head tore his cap away; but like a human catapult he had struck the other, and with the force of impact both rolled upon the sand.

A lust for vengeance was upon Keith; a lust to kill—with his bare hands. He had nothing else—only his bare hands. They had murdered Allan. Allan was dead. He was fighting tigerishly now—to kill. Because Allan was dead. Because this man around whose body his arms were locked was one of those who had murdered Allan.

There seemed to be another struggle going on a few yards away—he caught glimpses of it— indistinct, shadowy, swaying forms in the darkness as he rolled over and over. That was Hoka—for Taipi's scream had been that of a man wounded to death. They would kill Hoka too—the odds were too heavy. And then it would be his turn. But that mattered nothing if he could take toll for Allan's death; this man he fought with first—and another of them if he could! But if no more than one, then at least this foul thing whose breath was upon his cheek, who snarled and raved and slavered like a beast as he fought.

But the man was strong; his strength as greatly multiplied by the fear of death as his, Keith's strength was multiplied by

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the flaming fury that possessed him. Again and again they writhed and tossed this way and that, neither of them able to break the other's hold and gain his feet, each seeking to embed his fingers in the other's throat. And it was the other, not Keith, who succeeded first.

Gasping, choking, Keith tore at the man's hold. It was like something bony, slimy covered—like the clutch of some creature that was not human, tearing and digging into his neck. And he became conscious that the other's right hand, as his own closed over it, possessed only the thumb and the jagged stumps of the four fingers—and the feel of it was abhorrent. Madly, he wrenched it away, and his own hand in turn shot to the other's throat.

They rolled over on the sand. And Keith's fingers tightened—tightened—tightened. But as he rolled over he became suddenly aware that the shadowy forms that had been engaged in the nearby struggle were now hovering above him. It had not lasted long—Hoka's struggle—nor his own either—just a matter of little more than moments. But he almost had his man now. Just a few more of those moments, just a——

Something struck him with a crushing blow on his head. He felt his hands relax, his strength flow from him—and then nothingness.

Chapter II

THE NAMELESS ISLE

IT WAS breaking dawn, the sun's first rays just beginning to crimson the east when Keith returned to partial consciousness. He opened his eyes to find that he was lying on a stretch of beach; and, wondering in a dazed way how he had come there, he was suddenly assailed with a sense of profound depression and foreboding that he could not understand.

He stirred—and the movement brought him intense pain. His head ached violently, and there was an unaccountable soreness and stiffness in his right side. It was very strange; there was an ugly bewilderment about it all. And what were those great red blotches on his white jacket and on his shirt? He touched them with his fingers. His fingers became tinged with the same color. Blood! He must have been bleeding profusely. Perhaps he was still bleeding.

What was it all about? What had happened? Why couldn't he remember? Why was his brain clouded like this? By rights he should have been on board the *Malola*.

The *Malola!* Yes, that brought vague glimmerings of recollection—the schooner and a beach somewhere were mixed up together. And there had been a fire, too, hadn't there? Yes, there it was—or rather the charred, dead remains of it. He could see it from where he lay; and beyond, just a little way off, farther up on the beach, there was green foliage and a skyline of palms and other trees.

He raised himself up painfully, first to his elbow, and then to a sitting posture; and facing seaward now, stared around him. And suddenly his eyes widened and became fixed. A dead man lay there a few yards away, his limbs twisted beneath him, his arms flung out on either side, his glazed eyes turned to the morning light.

Keith's lips moved. A moan came from them.

"Allan!"

And in the fullness of returned consciousness, as it swept upon him now with all its unendurable grief and bitterness, he threw himself face down on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands.

Allan dead—murdered! Allan, who had meant so much more than brother to him—who had been father, mother, tutor and friend to him ever since he had been a youngster. Memories, tender, poignant memories of all the years they had spent together, came crowding upon him. He remembered how, as a boy, instead of sending him away to the loneliness of a boarding school, for there was no mother then, Allan had taken him aboard the newly-bought *Malola* after their father had died; and how, from then on, beginning with

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the elementary subjects, Allan had carried him on through, not only mathematics and navigation, but a bit of the classics and the best in literature as well. He had always kept those "school" books in his cabin on the *Malola*—sentiment had prevented them from ever having been destroyed. And then afterwards! He owed everything to Allan. The years of companionship and affectionate understanding had made Allan and himself inseparable—not even the plan they had once discussed of extending their connections by buying another schooner, taking separate commands, and thus probably doubling their profits, had ever had any serious weight with either of them. Their comradeship had meant so much more than financial prosperity. Memories! They were so many and so intimate!

HE LIFTED his head wearily. He was weak, miserably, physically weak, but he must get a grip on himself. Not memories. There was the present. He began to piece together the events that had led up to the callous, inhuman, brutal treachery of which Allan and himself and Taipi and Hoka had been the victims; first, the signal fire on the beach, which had caused them to put off from the schooner in the boat, and— Where was the boat? Where was the *Malola?* And where were Taipi and Hoka? He had looked only at Allan lying there on the beach—his eyes in that first gaze had looked nowhere else.

He sat up again, and this time it was not only Allan that he saw. Something hot and choking welled up in his throat. Taipi and Hoka, those brown-skinned friends of years, were here—Taipi and Hoka were the two forms, a little distance apart over there beyond Allan, that lay motionless on the sand.

Keith swept the beach line with his eyes. There was no boat. The boat was gone.

He stared out to sea. There was no sign of the schooner. The *Malola* was gone.

Keith gained his feet and staggered to Allan's side. Reverently he closed the sightless eyes, and, kneeling on the sand, lifted the other's hands and clasped them in his own. His lips moved, but he made no sound. And no tears came; but into his gray, drawn face there came a look, grim and remorseless, dominating agony and grief, that set a seal upon the oath of vengeance that was being sworn by those silently moving lips.

After a little while, he made his way to Taipi. Taipi, too, was dead; and, like Allan, had evidently been killed instantly with no chance to make even a fight for his life, for he had been shot through the head.

Keith passed on to Hoka, and, kneeling here in turn, gave a quick and sudden cry. Hoka, though unconscious and wounded in many places by knife thrusts, was still breathing, still alive.

An object lying on the sand a little way off attracted Keith's attention. It was his cap which he remembered had been torn from his head by a revolver shot. He staggered and lurched toward it, picked it up, staggered and lurched to the water's edge, filled it with water, and, pinching the bullet-ridden cloth into folds so that he should lose as little of the contents as possible, regained Hoka's side and began dashing the water into the Malay's face.

Presently the man opened his eyes; and, after a little while, his gaze wandering to the two inert forms on the beach, he spoke faintly.

"They are dead, *Tuan?*" he asked.

"Yes," Keith answered. "And there is little doubt but that you and I, Hoka, were also left for dead. In any case, we are alone here."

"Great evil has fallen upon us, O master," said Hoka after a moment's silence. "Does the *Tuan* know the meaning of it?"

Keith shook his head.

"No," he replied; "I do not know any more than you do, Hoka—neither why we were treacherously attacked, nor how those men came to be on the island, nor who they were."

The Malay sat up suddenly.

"I swear an oath, *Tuan,*" he said hoarsely. "Because of my love for the *Tuan* who is dead, and my love for Taipi, who also is dead, and because of what has been done here, if I live, I will know who they are, and they shall die. Let the *Tuan* bear witness to the oath that I have made!"

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"I, too," said Keith in a low voice, "have sworn an oath that is not far apart from yours. But now we must think first of ourselves, and what we are to do."

"My strength returns, O master," Hoka answered. "And I can walk, even if it be but slowly and but a little way at a time. But I have great thirst."

"We know that there is water on the island, at least," said Keith. "But we'll tie up each other's hurts a bit before we do anything else. We've both of us lost too much blood as it is."

"I will tear up my *sarong, Tuan,*" Hoka offered. "It will make many pieces, and be enough for both."

"No," said Keith—and found his voice suddenly unsteady. "Taipi has no longer any use for one. We will take his. Try your strength, Hoka. See if you can walk that far. If not, I will get it."

Hoka got slowly to his feet.

"It is well, *Tuan,*" he said. "See, I stand—and walk."

Keith nodded—and, sitting on the sand, watched the other. Hoka made but slow progress. Hoka was very weak—just about as weak as Keith was. He continued to watch Hoka for a moment as the man began to remove Taipi's *sarong;* then his eyes travelled to where Allan lay—and abruptly he stared in another direction. There was something else that ought to be done beside the binding up of wounds and the searching for water—but both Hoka and he were too weak to attempt it now. Perhaps by evening, if they rested in the shade, and found water, and found fruit of any sort that would serve for food, they would be stronger—perhaps not. Allan would understand, and so would Taipi, that it was not because of callousness that they were left lying there.

Hoka came back bringing the *sarong.* They tore it into strips. It made grotesque and ludicrous looking bandages, which, under happier circumstances, would have brought a smile to Keith's lips; but now the gaily flowered pattern of the cloth seemed to possess only a grim irony wholly in keeping with all else that had transpired—and with it they bound up each other's wounds.

This done, they rose and began to make their way across the beach toward the trees. It was not far, but it took them long; their footsteps were halting—one sometimes supporting the other, where neither out of his meager store had any strength to spare. And as they stumbled on with still some yards to go, Hoka spoke.

"Tuan," he said thickly, "the sun grows hot, and I burn as though with fire. Does the *Tuan* remember where the pool is from which we carried water to the *Malola* when we came here before?"

"No"—Keith circled his own fevered lips with the tip of his tongue—"but that doesn't really matter, for I remember that in walking over the island, we found springs in a lot of places. We'll find plenty of water, Hoka, never fear! And near at hand, too, unless I miss my guess. Those fellows who attacked us would not be living far away from water, and it is more than likely that their camp is very close to this spot where they made their fire. Yes, see!" He pointed suddenly a little to the right. "There's a path there! Water, Hoka! My God, I want it, too! Come on! Come on!"

WHERE they had stumbled before, they stumbled the more now in their eagerness as they attempted to hurry—and like two drunken men they swayed and reeled their way across the remaining stretch of sand to where the path that Keith had pointed out led in through the trees. And here, because the path was very narrow—indeed no more than a footway where the thick undergrowth had been trampled down—they were obliged to go in single file, and their stumbling brought them more than once to grief, for each in turn tripped and fell several times.

For perhaps fifty yards they followed the twisting path, Keith leading, and then abruptly they came out on the edge of a little clearing. And Keith saw across the clearing a crude shelter that was made of the boughs of trees; but also, and

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what was of infinitely greater moment for the instant, he saw, almost at his feet, a little pool of clear spring water.

He flung himself down upon the ground and drank, and Hoka drank beside him. It was deliciously cool. It was nectar. In all his life he had never drunk so gratefully. And when the torment of thirst was gone he plunged his throbbing head beneath the surface, and, tearing open his shirt, splashed the water upon his neck and chest. It did not dispel the pain of his wounds or magically restore his strength, but he rose to his feet refreshed and thankful.

He nodded in the direction of the shelter across the clearing, as Hoka, too, stood up.

"That's where they lived, of course," he said, "and it's possible they may have left some food in there that will keep us going until we are able to forage for something for ourselves. We'll go and see."

He led the way to the hut, and, with Hoka behind him, entered. It was quite roomy, thickly roofed with branches, and three sides were enclosed. On the ground and around the sides, armsful of leaves had been heaped together, obviously to serve for beds. In the corner at the rear of the hut was a large biscuit tin. There was nothing else.

Keith went over to the tin and opened it. It was still about a quarter full.

"Hard-tack," he said; and, handing one of the biscuits to Hoka, took one himself. "We'll have to go sparingly with these, for there doesn't seem to be anything else."

They sat down opposite each other, each on a heap of leaves, munching at their coarse fare.

"*Tuan,* I am weary," said Hoka, his biscuit still unfinished. "Is there anything that we must do now for a little while?"

Keith, too, had eaten but a portion of his own ration, and that without relish. He put the remainder of the biscuit in his pocket now as he looked across at Hoka. The man seemed utterly done in.

"Yes," he said, forcing a cheerful smile, "rest, Hoka—and sleep if we can."

"It is well, O master," said Hoka gratefully—and stretched himself out at full length on his pile of leaves.

Sleep! Keith shook his head. He, too, was in sore need of rest; sleep, though, was another matter! How could one sleep with a mind so tortured that one's physical sufferings by comparison became insignificant?

But sleep, born out of pure exhaustion, came quickly to Keith nevertheless.

WHEN he opened his eyes again the light was fading. It was late afternoon. Hoka had obviously wakened earlier and had gone out somewhere, for the heap of leaves opposite was untenanted and the hut was empty.

Keith sat up and stared around him. Nothing but the biscuit tin and the strewn leaves! But they were enough—enough in their stark, correlative significance, to set his mind remorselessly at its bitter work again, and to bring a gnawing at his heart. And then suddenly, as he sat there with his chin cupped in his hands, his eyes became fixed on something white just at his feet and amongst the leaves, which latter he must have disturbed in his sleep. He stooped over and picked it up. It was a small sheet of somewhat soiled paper that showed signs of having been wet—undoubtedly a page that had fallen out of a loose-leaf notebook, for the little punch holes at one side, though frayed and torn, were still plainly in evidence. Pencil writing covered both sides of the paper, but the light in the hut was too dim now to enable him to read it.

He got up abruptly and went outside. There was still light enough here, but the writing was badly blurred in places and he could only decipher it with difficulty. It began abruptly in the middle of a sentence:

"*. . . end will come. I am in no sense deceived. Except that they have taken the mahogany box from me I can complain of no harsh treatment. But they are the stamp of men who would crush out a human life, if it stood in their way, with no more compunction than they would have in exterminating the merest insect that*

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crossed their paths. While we remain on this island and there is no escape for any of us, I am safe because I am useful to them, for the work of gathering fruit and such other edibles as are to be found. But I know only too well what will happen if the chance ever comes for them to get away. One of them goes each day to the beach and remains on watch for the sight of a sail or a passing vessel whose attention may be attracted. God help me if one is ever sighted, for that will be the day of my death. It may be tomorrow. I do not know. It may be never.

Saturday: It is two days now since I have written anything here. During that time nothing untoward happened until early this afternoon when. . ."

As abruptly as it had begun, the writing ended here in midsentence at the bottom of the reverse side of the page.

Keith's brows drew together, and his lips straightened in a grim line. It was obviously a portion of a diary, and, if it were to be taken at its face value, there had been a *fifth* man here on the island. Where was that man now? He shook his head, and now his hand went wearily to his eyes. God, was there more of this—still more to come! Could there be other than one meaning to it? There had only been four men on the beach. Of that he was certain, and——

HE TURNED with a start as a hand touched his elbow. It was Hoka. He stared into the Malay's face. What was the matter with the man? Hoka was wounded and weak, of course, which could account for much, but not for the twitching lips and the naked fear in the other's face.

And then suddenly Keith reached out his hand and laid it on the Malay's shoulders. He knew what was the matter with the man. Instinctively he knew what was coming. He lacked only the details.

"Tell your tale, Hoka," he said in a low voice.

"It is an evil one, *Tuan*," Hoka cried out in shrill, almost hysterical tones. "A black curse rests upon this place. It is the abode of devils. Death, O master! There is only death here! I am afraid. The smell of it and the touch of it is upon me, and I, too, shall die!"

"Nonsense!" said Keith with quiet reassurance. "You're done in now—both of us are; but a few days will set us straight again. Now, pull yourself together, and tell me all about it."

For an instant Hoka made no response, then his shoulders straightened.

"Yes, *Tuan*," he said, steadying his voice with an effort. "I am ashamed. If I die, I die. I no longer fear. Listen then, O master! While the *Tuan* still slept, I awoke and went out of the hut. It was not long ago—only a few minutes. The *Tuan* must have awakened before I had gone many steps in there amongst the trees." He flung out his hand, pointing the direction. "I had not enough strength to take me far, but I hoped to find fruit while it was yet light. I found no fruit. I know not if there is any fruit, but I found that, instead, which was not good to see, and it was then that the fear the *Tuan* has seen came upon me."

"I know," said Keith gravely. "You found a dead man."

Hoka's eyes widened. "The *Tuan* knows! How does the *Tuan* know?"

Keith held up the piece of paper in his hand.

"I, too, found something," he said. "It was amongst the leaves on which I had been sleeping in there in the hut. It was written by the man you have just seen. He expected death at the hands of those men who killed my brother and Taipi on the beach last night. Was it so you found him—murdered?"

"I have told the *Tuan*," he said hoarsely, "that what I saw was not good to look upon."

"Take me there!" said Keith tersely.

WITHOUT a word Hoka swung around and headed in amongst the trees and undergrowth. For a hundred paces Keith followed, and then Hoka halted.

"It is here, *Tuan*," Hoka said—and drew to one side.

Keith stepped forward—and with a sharp ejaculation that mingled pity and anger, stooped over the body of a white-haired man of perhaps sixty years of age

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that, half-hidden by the foliage, lay sprawled upon the ground. And then for an instant Keith turned away his eyes. He was weak and ill himself, his mind already in torment, and, as Hoka had said, it was a sight not good to see. The man's head had been battered with some heavy instrument, presumably an ax, and one side of his face was no more than a smear of coagulated blood.

But presently, regaining his grip upon himself, Keith knelt beside the body. Who was the man? Was there any clue to his identity—any clue as to where he had come from? That loose-leaf notebook, for instance—the diary.

Keith searched through the pockets—which were not many in number, for the man was scantily clad—but they had evidently been rifled, for they contained not a single article of any description. But Keith's examination, once undertaken, was thorough. He searched inside the shirt and elsewhere about the man's person for the notebook. It was not there. He searched the clothing then for the maker's name, for a laundry mark, for anything that might by any possibility lead to identification. Nothing! That the man had obviously been a man of education and refinement was all he discovered—the excellent texture of such clothing as there was, the indefinable stamp of good breeding on such portions of the face as were still unmarred, and the page from the diary, proved that.

Keith stood up.

"There is nothing that we can do here, Hoka," he said slowly. "We have neither the strength nor any tool with which to dig up the earth, and we have not the strength to carry him to the beach where we can dig up the sand with our hands as we will do for my brother and Taipi. Perhaps tomorrow we will be able to tear away small branches and cover him. It is all that we can do."

"Yes, *Tuan*," Hoka answered.

"We will go back to the hut now"—Keith was speaking more to himself than to his companion, scarcely conscious indeed that he was speaking aloud—"and rest for a little while again before we go to the beach. We will have the cool of the night to help us there with our work."

"Yes, *Tuan*," Hoka said again.

They returned to the hut and both threw themselves down on their respective pile of leaves.

KEITH lay with his face in his hands. Rest—yes! But not mental rest. How could there be mental rest? There were Allan and Taipi, and this sight that he had just seen! Who were these five men who had been here on the island? And why had the fifth been murdered? What was that mahogany box the fifth man had written about? Had that anything to do with it? If only he had been able to find the rest of the diary! But it was gone irrecoverably. The four men had unquestionably taken it as they had taken everything else belonging to their victim. Whether or not they had discovered after the murder that a page was missing from the book it was hard to say; but it was practically certain that the owner himself had not been aware of it, for if he had had any deliberate intention of leaving a message it would have been much more definite in its tenor. He would unquestionably have told who he was, and he would likewise have named the four. There was little doubt, therefore, that the page had merely fallen out of the book unnoticed by him, and had been covered up with the leaves. Did it matter, after all?

Allan was gone!

Keith crushed his face in his hands. That cry kept welling up from his heart. But it would numb the agony a little, wouldn't it, if he could keep his mind fixed on these other matters, instead of allowing his thoughts to dwell wholly upon Allan?

Why had those four men not been content to get into the boat and go out to the schooner with Allan and himself, and Hoka and Taipi? More than once throughout the day he had asked himself that question and could find no answer. He found none now.

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It couldn't have been because they had murdered the fifth man, for neither he nor Allan would ever have known that a fifth man had existed.

What had happened to Gur Singh? Yes, he could probably answer that with only too good reason to fear that his answer was the right one. Gur Singh was dead. They had taken the boat, gone off to the *Malola,* killed Gur Singh, and sailed away. One against four! What chance would Gur Singh have had?

If only it hadn't been so dark on the beach last night! If he could but have seen their faces! As it was, he knew only that one of them had a mutilated hand —a right hand with only bony, irregular stumps where the fingers had been. Did it do him any good to know that?

Allan was gone!

He lay very quiet then. It was useless to fight it back. Let the memories come, let his heart grieve its full if it would. Tonight, do what he would, he realized there was room for nothing else.

When he finally raised his head his face was wet, and darkness had fallen.

"We will go to the beach now, Hoka," he said.

And Hoka, from tossing restlessly on his pile of leaves, rose to his feet and answered, "Yes, *Tuan.*"

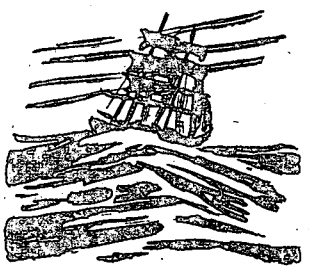
WHEN the sun rose there were tracks upon the beach as though two heavy objects had been laboriously dragged across it; and in the sand just above high-water mark, where two men, ill and spent, had dug and clawed with their hands throughout the night, were two crosses crudely fashioned out of small tree limbs and held together with creepers.

CHAPTER III

SOME THREADS ARE KNOTTED

KEITH stared with puzzled eyes around him. He felt out with his hands. This wasn't a pile of leaves on which he was lying—and he should by lying on a pile of leaves. No; that wasn't right either; he should be lying on the ground beside a pool of very clear, cold water. He had crawled there from a hut of some kind. But there were no trees overhead now, and there was a door in front of him that was kept partially open by a brass hook, and a hanging swayed gently. Everything seemed to sway gently.

He struggled desperately to correlate all this; he felt out with his hands again, and his fingers plucked at some kind of



covering. Yes, of course, he quite understood now! He had been dreaming. He could not remember the details of the dream, but it had been a vile and hideous thing that, though he was now awake again, still left him profoundly depressed, so great was the lingering impression of reality. This swaying was the swaying of a ship; this soft and yielding thing on which he lay was a bunk; and that door there on a brass hook was a cabin door. It had been only a dream. He was lying on his bunk in his cabin on the *Malola,* of course. But there was something irritatingly unfamiliar about the cabin. The bookcase with all the old school books in it that used to be at the right-hand side of the door must have been moved out. He would go down somebody's street about that!

The door began to open very softly, very slowly, just a few inches at a time. Keith blinked his eyes painfully. Now what was up?

A face appeared. Then the tall gaunt form of an East Indian came silently into the cabin. Gur Singh! Ugly mug Gur Singh had—always had had! What was the man tip-toeing about in this sly fashion for?

Keith pointed a finger.

"Who the hell took my bookcase, Gur Singh?" he demanded. And then he frowned—he thought he had shouted at the man, but his voice seemed to sound no louder than a faint whisper even in his own ears. But, anyway, why didn't Gur Singh answer? Instead, the man crossed to the bunk, and, bowing his forehead, laid Keith's hand upon it. Also the man's eyes seemed to be full of tears. "What's the matter with you, Gur Singh?" he inquired

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querulously. "What are you crying for?"

"Sahib," Gur Singh answered, "I cry for joy. It was in my mind but a little while ago that I would never hear the sahib's voice again."

Keith frowned again. In a way this seemed to fit in somehow or other with his dream, but he couldn't make anything out of it.

"Where's my bookcase," he insisted. "Who's been messing about here with the gear in my cabin?"

"This is another cabin, sahib," Gur Singh answered gently. "The sahib is not on the *Malola*."

Keith closed his eyes for an instant. Not on the *Malola!* It was very hard to think at all clearly, everything seemed to be muddled in his mind.

"Then where's the *Malola?*" he muttered.

Gur Singh shook his head.

"I know not, sahib."

Keith pondered this, but the effort to concentrate only brought more confusion.

"Where's Allan?" he questioned wearily.

"Sahib"—Gur Singh's eyes were averted as he spoke— "rest now for a little time. The sahib has been very ill. When the sahib has grown strong again we will talk more together."

Keith was conscious that Gur Singh's words brought a strange sort of relief. He did not want to talk—and Gur Singh said he mustn't. A sense of curiosity seemed to have been dimly awakened, but his brain was too indolent to struggle with it—and Gur Singh said he must rest.

"All right, Gur Singh," he murmured —and, but vaguely aware that the East Indian was stealing softly out of his cabin, fell asleep again.

THERE came long periods of slumber, and periods, brief at first, of wakefulness. And in these latter periods, as he lay staring at the cabin ceiling, he distinguished between night and day, because sometimes the sunlight flooding in through the porthole hurt his eyes, and sometimes it was dark. And then there came a time when, though through weakness of body he could scarcely move, his mind regained its strength and clarity. And this happened in the night, and it came upon him suddenly as he awoke. And for a moment, stunned, as a blow or knife thrust first stuns the nerves before the pain and torture come, he lay without a sound as memory flooded in upon him, and then, in his mental agony he moaned—and bit his lips that he might not repeat it and give way like one wholly unmanned.

Self-control returned, and again for a little space he lay there motionless and silent, then suddenly he raised himself on his elbow.

"Gur Singh!" he called loudly. And again, "Gur Singh!"

Like an echo from somewhere he heard the name caught up and repeated, and presently the cabin door opened.

"I am here, sahib," a voice said softly out of the darkness.

"Light the lamp, Gur Singh," Keith ordered.

Gur Singh obeyed; and as the yellow glow from the swinging lamp filled the cabin, Keith's eyes fastened on his own bare forearm and his head that lay upon the coverlet. Gur Singh had said that he had been very ill; but he had not thought it had been like this. His arm and hand were thin and emaciated almost beyond relief. He looked up at Gur Singh.

"Worse than I thought!" he said tersely.

"Yes, sahib," said Gur Singh simply.

"There's a lot I want to know—a great many things," said Keith. "Shut the door, and sit down."

Gur Singh hesitated.

"The sahib's eyes are clear, and his mind has come to its strength again," he said; "but there is still no strength in the sahib's body. Sahib, wait then yet a few days more. Will the sahib not say that it would be better so?"

"No!" said Keith decisively. "It won't do my body any good to lie here, if I torment myself mentally." He motioned toward the door. "We will talk now, Gur Singh."

GUR SINGH closed the door.

"As the sahib wills," he said—and, squatting on his haunches on the cabin floor beside the bunk, folded his arms.

"I am gong to let you tell your story

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in your own way presently," said Keith slowly. "But first, taking it for granted that it was you who somehow returned to the island and found me there, there is something that I want to know. If you returned to the island, tell me this: Hoka is dead, isn't he?"

"It is even so, sahib," Gur Singh answered in a low voice. "I it was who returned to the island, and Hoka was dead."

"I was afraid so," said Keith bitterly; "but I wasn't sure. I can remember but little of anything that happened on the island after the first few days. Hoka's wounds, I know, grew worse and worse; and I was in a raging fever. We had very little to eat — practically nothing but the few biscuits we found in a tin in the hut, and they were hardly the right sort of nourishment for men in our condition. We tried to find some fruit, and I think Hoka got a little on the second day; but after that we neither of us could do much more than crawl from the hut to the water pool and back again. At first we emptied the biscuit tin and filled it with water, but the tin leaked, and the water didn't last very long, and after a bit, the tin, if there was any water in it at all, was so heavy that we couldn't carry it. So Hoka crawled to the pool when thirst drove him to it, and so did I. While my senses still remained, I could hear Hoka raving in his delirium on those journeys, and in the hut, too; afterwards, I suppose I did the same. And then, though this is very indistinct in my mind and I do not know when it was, it seemed to me that I was conscious of a great stillness about Hoka as he lay on his pile of leaves. The last I remember is that I was lying on the ground beside the pool which was so clear that a distorted face mirrored on its surface—my own of course, though I didn't recognize it—seemed to jeer at me; and so cold that, as I struck at the face with my fist, the water felt like ice."

"It was there we found the sahib," said Gur Singh gravely; "and likewise we found Hoka on the leaves in the hut. Also we found two crosses and we knew that Allan Sahib and Taipi were dead."

Keith's fingers, from plucking at the covering of the bunk, curled into the palm of his hand.

"Yes, they were killed that night," he said hoarsely; and then after an instant's silence, "Did you find the other man in the woods? We were unable to bury him."

Gur Singh shook his head. "Another man, sahib? No, we knew naught of him. Who was this other man of whom the sahib speaks?"

"I do not know," Keith answered. "I found a page from his notebook, but it did not tell very much. In any case, it is certain he was murdered by the other four."

"The piece of paper was in the sahib's pocket," said Gur Singh. "I have kept it safely."

Keith nodded. He was conscious that for the first time he was scrutinizing this squatting figure on the floor minutely. Perhaps it was due to the play of light as the ceiling lamps swung in a slow arc with the heeling of the vessel, but Gur Singh seemed changed. Gur Singh was still comparatively a young man, not more than thirty-five, but the olive brown face with its thin, patchy beard seemed to have aged ten years since he had seen it last; and it no longer possessed its customary mask of Eastern immobility—the eyes denied that now, for there was something smoldering ominously in their jet-black depths that had never been there before. Also the man wore a makeshift turban, and clothes that obviously were not his own—and that made a difference too.

KEITH suddenly reached out his hand toward the other.

"You too, Gur Singh, have been through hell," he said compassionately. "Tell me your story now."

Gur Singh caught the outstretched hand, and for the second time, pressed it

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against his forehead; then, lifting Keith's hand back on to the coverlet, he folded his arms again.

"I am the sahib's servant, and the sahib is my life," he said brokenly.

"I can see that you have saved mine," Keith answered simply. "Now tell me all, Gur Singh."

"Yes, sahib; but the sahib must have patience, for the tale is not easy to tell in the sahib's tongue. When the sahib and his brother and Hoka and Taipi went away in the boat to the beach that night, I, Gur Singh, as the sahib knows, was left alone on the *Malola,* and once, for a few minutes, I went below the deck. It was there, sahib, that I thought I heard the sound of shots, but the sounds were very faint, and I was not sure—and why, sahib, should there be shots? I had seen no flashes. I went to the deck and looked toward the shore. I could see only the fire on the beach, and the fire was but as a little point of light in the darkness. I watched then, and after a space, the splashing of the oars came to my ears, but it was not until the boat was close to the *Malola's* side that I could even see it. The sahib will remember that it was very dark?"

"I remember," said Keith grimly.

"I called out," Gur Singh went on, "and I was answered by a voice that said, 'All right'! I could not have said that it was the sahib's voice, or that it was the voice of Allan Sahib, for, in the splashing of the oars which was great at that time, who could tell the voice of any man from that of another? Furthermore I could see that, as there had been four in the boat when it had left the *Malola,* so there were four in it now when it returned. I ran then to get a lantern so that the sahibs might the better see their way to come aboard. After that, sahib, for a time, I knew nothing, for as I leaned over the side with the lantern, a figure from the boat sprang over the rail and with something he carried in his hand, I know not what, struck me upon the head, and my senses fled. Sahib, I know not how long it was before my eyes opened again, but I was still lying on the deck, and two men were standing above me, and one had flung a pail of water over my head, and the *Malola* was running before the wind. Then, sahib, I was stood upon my feet, pushed along the deck to where the other two were at the wheel, and the four stood around me. Their faces were evil beyond any I had ever seen before, and one man held a revolver close against my heart. Another asked me if I could find my way upon the sea, and steer the ship from one place to another and——"

"You mean navigate her?"

"Yes, sahib. And it was for that reason my life was spared, for they knew not how to find the way themselves."

"I see!" Keith nodded. "You told them that you could. Where did they want to go?"

"Wait, sahib, but a moment. It was then, when I had told them that I could take the ship from place to place, that I first knew what had befallen on the island. They said if I took the ship where they directed and was faithful to them, I should live and be set free, but that otherwise I should die there upon the deck, as the sahib, and Allan Sahib and Hoka and Taipi had died at their hands on the island. And then, sahib"—Gur Singh flung his arms sharply above his head in a fierce, impassioned gesture, and the smoldering light in his eyes seemed to leap into sudden flame—— "I, Gur Singh, grovelled like a dog upon the deck before them, and begged for my life, and swore that what it was their will I should do, that would I do, and be faithful to them. Does the sahib understand?"

"I understand," Keith answered.

"No man"—Gur Singh's arms were folded across his breast again and his voice was low and even—"has yet called Gur Singh a fool. I knew well that when I had brought the ship within sight of such place as they desired, I, too, should then die. Would I be allowed to go amongst men and tell the tale of those who had been murdered on the

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island, and all else that I knew? All this I thought of and all this I knew as I grovelled upon the deck; but, sahib, what was on my lips was not that which was in my heart. If by dying then I could have brought destruction likewise upon them all, then would I have gladly died, for I knew grief and fury then such as I had not thought it was given man to know. Sahib, should I have died? Would it have availed anything? Whereas if I lived who could tell what might come to pass?"

"You did well, Gur Singh," said Keith with a twisted smile. "Otherwise I, too, would have died. Go on!"

"Yes, sahib. They talked long together amongst themselves and they said then I should steer the *Malola* for Surabaya. It was in my mind, sahib, that, though they were English, they had no liking for an English place. Also they spoke, too, of the Dutch ships that sailed from Java."

"I can quite see their point!" said Keith. "Roughly, with fair weather, it would have taken you about two weeks to make Surabaya. Well?"

Gur Singh smiled curiously.

"They were well content that it should take that many days," he said, "for even in Surabaya were there not those who might know the *Malola?* And how would these men say they had come upon her? But if the ship were painted black where before she had been white, and if she bore another name, what then, sahib? Was there not always paint aboard the *Malola,* and color to mix it as we would? The next morning they began to paint the *Malola.*"

KEITH sucked in his breath sharply. "So they're making for Surabaya with the *Malola* in a new dress, are they?"

Gur Singh shook his head.

"Who is there now to guide the ship, sahib?" he asked. "And would they still go to Surabaya, even if they could find the way, knowing that I, Gur Singh, would make it known that they should be looked for there?"

"Yes, that's right!" Keith agreed with a hard smile. "They'll have to get a navigator, pick one up on an island somewhere, before they can make for any definite destination—and that means God knows where. But go back a bit, and let me get this straight. I take it from what you say that they're still sailing more or less blindly around. How and when, then, did you escape from the *Malola,* and did you at any time shape a course for Surabaya as they told you to do?"

"I will answer the last of the sahib's questions first," replied Gur Singh, "for so will the sahib understand better the answer to the others. They knew little of the sea, but they were men with sharp minds, and the compass and the charts could not be made to lie. I could not steer north if I should steer south; but a little this way or a little that way out of the true course was as nothing, sahib. I pointed out the course to Surabaya, and they were well content; but always I took the *Malola* a little to the east, for there lay the island of Laoolu. And did not Rogers Sahib, the sahib's friend and the friend of Allan Sahib, dwell upon Laoolu; and did not Rogers Sahib own a large schooner?"

"I am beginning to understand," he said softly. "Carry on, Gur Singh."

"Sahib, was there any other way? It was in my mind that my tale must be told, and that even if the sahib and Allan Sahib, and Taipi and Hoka were indeed dead, still must I go back to the island for them. But the coming to Laoolu must be in the evening or at night, for otherwise I, Gur Singh, could not make the land. And so for four days we sailed, and because of the handling of the ship as I directed, it came about that we were passing not two miles from Laoolu an hour after the sun went down on the fourth night. Sahib, what was the passing of an island? Had we not passed many islands? Three of the four men were in the cabin. The other and I, Gur Singh, were on the deck. And I made pretense that the jibs were not drawing as I would have them, and I called to the man to take the wheel. And this he did. Then I, Gur Singh, went along the deck, and, hidden by the dark-

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ness and the sails, climbed over the bow of the *Malola* and dropped into the water. Thus it was, sahib, that I made my escape, and, by swimming, came to the shore and reached the house of Rogers Sahib. But whither after that the *Malola* went, I know not; but this I knew, that they would not dare to stop the ship and follow me ashore into the hands of those to whom I would have related all that had come to pass."

"I think I can supply the rest," said Keith. "You told Rogers what had happened. This is his schooner, and you went back to the island with it. But where is Rogers? It's true that up to now I probably wouldn't have known the difference if he had spent half his time in the cabin here, but why isn't he down here with us now?"

"Sahib," Gur Singh replied, "Rogers Sahib is not on the schooner. When I got to Rogers Sahib's house he had been ill many days by reason of a tree that had fallen on his leg and broken it, but he listened to my tale. Sahib, he was a strong man, and yet he wept. And he gave me the schooner and his native crew that I might return to the island as I desired."

"Good old Rogers!" Keith murmured; then abruptly, "So I suppose we're on our way back to Laoolu now?"

"No, sahib. In three days if the wind is fair we will come to Surabaya."

"Surabaya!" Keith stared. "You think *they'll* go there after all—that there's a chance of catching them there?"

"No, sahib. I know not where they will go, or where they will make land, for are they not now like a ship that is without a rudder? But to Surabaya they will not go knowingly, for have they not spoken of that place to me, and would not I, Gur Singh, in the telling of my tale say that it was to Surabaya I was to take the *Malola?* It is for the sahib's sake, and because Surabaya was nearer than any other place where that which I sought was to be found, that we go there now. The sahib has been very ill, and the sahib is still very ill. Is there a hospital on Laoolu, and those things that the sahib must have to make him whole again?"

For the second time, Keith reached out his hand impulsively to the other.

"Gur Singh," he said huskily, "is there anything you haven't thought of, or done for me?"

"Sahib—"Gur Singh's deep voice broke a little—"have I not said that the sahib was my life? And now, sahib, we have talked long together. Will not the sahib sleep for a little while?"

Keith flung out a clenched hand.

"Not yet!" he said. "I'm going through with this now. There are more things that I want to know. I want you to tell me something about the men themselves. You must have heard them talking a lot together. Did you get any idea of where they came from, or how they originally came to be on the island?"

"No, sahib; though they spoke of many things, they spoke not of that at all. I know not where they came from, nor yet how they came to be on the island. But this, sahib, I know, that when we went to seek the sahib, I and those with me searched for a boat or perhaps a wreck that might have brought them there, but we found nothing."

"Well, then, their names—what did they call each other? And, yes—that mahogany box! Did you see any one of them with a mahogany box, big or little?"

Gur Singh inclined his head sharply.

"Twice I saw it, sahib," he replied. "One of the four carried it under his arm when they talked with me just after they had come aboard the *Malola*. It was twice the length of a man's hand, and in width and depth the breadth of a man's hand. And afterwards I saw it once again, sahib, when I was called into the cabin the next day, and it was in the *Malola's* safe."

"In the safe!" ejaculated Keith. "I don't understand that! They would have had to

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blow the safe open in the first place. What was the use of putting anything in a safe that had been blown open?"

"Sahib, the door of the safe was open, but it had not been blown open."

"But it was locked!" Keith's brows drew together. "I am positive of that. I saw Allan lock it when we left the last port, and that was at Talufaigna a week before we got to the island where we were attacked. And neither Allan nor I would have had any occasion to open it in the meanwhile. It was certainly locked that night when those devils came aboard. How did they open it, then? Are you sure there were no signs of force having been used, no holes drilled in it, or anything like that?"

"I am sure, sahib."

Keith's frown deepened—then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, never mind," he said. "Did you see the mahogany box itself opened, or hear any of them say what was in it?"

"No, sahib. I know not what was in the box; and the next time I was in the cabin the door of the safe was no longer open."

KEITH smiled thinly.

"A bit queer!" he ejaculated. "But let's get back to the men themselves. Tell me anything you found out about them. Their names now! What did they call each other?"

"Sahib," said Gur Singh. "I heard much talk between them, for at night I was for hours alone upon the deck, and by reason of the wind being light and by the lashing of the wheel, I was able to creep often to the cabin skylight which was open, and there I listened to their voices. But many times their words were strange in my ears, for, though they were of the same tongue as the sahib's, and as Allan Sahib's, they were not the words of the sahib and of Allan Sahib; and the names by which they spoke to each other were such as I had never heard before, and were beyond understanding, for they were the names of colors and of beasts, and of birds."

Keith came up on his elbow.

"What do you mean—colors and beasts and birds? Can you remember them, Gur Singh?"

"Yes, sahib. One they called Black-ee; and one they called Whit-ee; and one they called the Weasel; and one there was who had but a thumb on one hand, for the fingers of that hand were gone, and him they called the Magpie."

"We're getting on!" Keith laughed shortly. "A coterie of professional crooks—wherever they came from! I can understand now how the safe was opened! What else, Gur Singh?"

Gur Singh was silent for a moment.

"Sahib," he asked finally, "what is the name of that great city from which came Clinton Sahib, who was the sahib's friend and the friend of Allan Sahib, and who sailed on the *Malola* a year ago, and who played a joke on the sahibs by the changing of his face and clothes at Nukualofa?"

"New York," Keith answered.

Again Gur Singh inclined his head.

"It was even as I thought, sahib, but it was in my mind to make sure. And was not this Clinton Sahib a great officer of the police amongst his own people?"

"Yes," said Keith—and looked at Gur Singh in a puzzled way. "What are you driving at, Gur Singh?"

"Sahib," replied Gur Singh, "when I lay by the cabin skylight and listened to the talk of those who killed Allan Sahib and Taipi and Hoka, it was of New York they talked; and they laughed, sahib, at the evil plans they would bring to pass when they reached this place that I have named—for it was there, sahib, first by taking ship at Surabaya, though it will be by some other way now, that they agreed amongst themselves to go."

KEITH came bolt upright on the bunk. "You're sure of this, Gur Singh?" he cried excitedly. "They're headed for New York—you're sure of that?"

"I am sure, sahib. Nay, more, I am sure, from what talk I heard, that in the days gone by there were those amongst them who had lived there and done evil things there. And thus it was, sahib, that the thoughts of Clinton Sahib came to me, for was not Clinton Sahib one of those in whose hands is the strength of the law in

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his own country? Is it not in the sahib's mind that these men shall be found and shall pay the price?"

"Whether by the law or by other means, there is nothing else in my mind, Gur Singh, nor ever will be"—there was a sudden strange and ominous quiet in Keith's voice— "until each one of the four and I have settled our reckoning together."

"It is well, sahib," murmured Gur Singh, "for by that which is in the sahib's voice I know that these dogs shall surely die."

Keith dropped back upon his pillow, and lay for a little time staring in silence at the cabin ceiling; then he spoke abruptly.

"Put out the light, Gur Singh. I may not sleep, for you've given me a lot to think about, but we won't talk any more tonight."

"Yes, sahib."

The light went out. The door closed. Keith still stared at the ceiling.

So the four of them, apparently old-time criminals, were headed for New York—which in turn, apparently, was one of their old-time stamping-grounds! Well he, too, would go to New York—as soon as he was able to travel and was fit for anything. Meanwhile there was Bob Clinton—and Clinton's home address was New York. Thank God for that chance meeting in Suva a year ago, where a mutual liking had developed between Allan, Clinton and himself, and had resulted in Clinton accepting an invitation to make the cruise on the *Malola* to Auckland. The one man in the world, probably, who could best help him now! Bob Clinton, of the United States Secret Service! He had come to know Clinton pretty intimately, intimately enough to recognize the other's sterling worth, his bulldog tenacity, his ability and his almost uncanny faculty of out-thinking one—to say nothing of the man being an artist in his profession, and not the kind of a chap one would like to cross swords with in any serious business! Clinton had come to Suva on sick leave—to recuperate from a bullet wound received in an affray with a counterfeiting gang somewhere on the Pacific Coast. The trip to Auckland on the schooner had been just what was needed to put him on his feet again—and it had cemented a fast friendship between the three of them.

He remembered the stories Clinton used to tell in his quiet, self-effacing way, stories of his "run-ins" with Federal transgressors; and he remembered particularly the one Clinton had told about a man who had disguised himself so cleverly that for years he had not only impersonated a dead man, but had lived with the dead man's family.

Allan had called that a bit thick, and they had accused Clinton of trying to pull their legs. Oh, yes, he remembered that—and had good cause to do so! That was the joke of which Gur Singh had spoken. Clinton had laughed and let the subject drop—but a week later, just after getting under way on the morning that they left Nukualofa, as hard a specimen of a gin-soaked stowaway beachcomber as he, Keith, had ever seen had crawled out from the schooner's forecastle. Angrily Allan had ordered the schooner hove-to, and, lowering a boat, had incontinently and none too gently deposited the beachcomber therein, with the laudable intention of ridding the *Malola* of the pest by sending the man ashore—only the beachcomber was Clinton, the man with whom they had lived and slept and eaten for days on end in closest intimacy!

THANK God for Bob Clinton! Clinton wouldn't leave a stone unturned—for old Allan's sake! He wasn't always in New York, of course—his duties took him everywhere—but the New York address would always find him, he had said.

Keith turned on his side. He was suddenly conscious that he was very weary—that he had over-stepped his strength. His mind, however, worked on—but in snatches now.

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Where would the *Malola* make land? When would those four men reach New York? He would get a description of each one of them from Gur Singh tomorrow, and write Clinton a letter. He might not be able to travel for weeks himself, and the four men might get to New York ahead of him, but in that case, Clinton might get on the trail, and——

After a time, Keith fell into fitful slumber.

CHAPTER IV

THE ENTREE TO THE UNDERWORLD

THE streets had been dingy, none too well-lighted, narrow, but even in the darkness, blatant of poverty—a maze of them. Tenements—numberless tenements. Small, cheap stores—in little, low buildings that gasped for breath and refused to be crowded out by the elbowing tenements. Here a butcher shop with a display of festooned sausages, or a Chinese laundry with steamy odor—there a basement entrance whose four or five steps descending steeply from the pavement were cluttered with the offerings of some purveyor of second-hand clothing.

Some of the streets were almost deserted; others teemed with life. Over some there seemed to brood an almost uncanny silence and isolation with the falling of the night; over others a feverish activity and a bedlam of noise—for here pushcarts lined the curbs and the hawkers shrieked their wares, and shawled women, plus earringed men, wrangled over prices, hurling unkind words in each other's faces, while scantily clad children played riotously in the gutters, or, from under a pushcart, if the god of luck were kind, surreptitiously sampled that which their small souls craved greedily, whether it were a shoe-string or an overripe tomato.

A bit of New York's East Side!

Keith's lips were set in a half-grim, half-whimsical smile as he walked along, his eyes constantly straying from his immediate surroundings to glance in an almost incredulous way at the shuffling, unkempt figure of his companion, and to glance down involuntarily, too, over his own rather disreputable attire. He remembered well enough Clinton's metamorphosis into the beachcomber on the *Malola* at Nukualofa; but, even so, it was hard to make himself believe that this shifty-eyed, furtive creature, with the dissipated face, who occasionally flung curt greetings out of one corner of his mouth to passing acquaintances of equally unprepossessing appearance, was the same Bob Clinton. The man was incomparable! It was as though he had reduced to a fine art the ability to assume at will any character that he desired.

Keith shifted a battered and cheap valise from one hand to the other. It was almost

three months now since Gur Singh had taken him to the hospital at Surabaya. He had been far more seriously ill than even he had imagined—and then his convalescence had dragged out through many seemingly interminable weeks. He had written Bob Clinton as he had planned, setting down minutely Gur Singh's description of the four men who had tricked Allan to his death, and stating his own determination to leave for New York the moment he was able to travel. The prolonged convalescence, of course, had given Clinton, this shuffling, sordid, shabby figure here, time to reply.

"I will do what I can for old Allan's sake and yours," Clinton had written amongst other things. "I understand, God knows, that you mean to see this through yourself; but you must not come here with any blare of trumpets. That would be fatal. Say nothing of your intentions to any one; and on no account attempt to bring Gur Singh with you. We will talk things over and make our plans when you get here. Meanwhile I shall not be idle. Cable me your sailing."

HE HAD sent the cable, and six days ago on the arrival of his ship at San Francisco had found a letter waiting for him from Clinton, which, following the instructions it contained, had brought him to New York tonight in a garb that

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to say the least of it, marked him out as no man of fashion.

He had not recognized Clinton in this man here, as the other had sidled up to him as he surveyed the crowds in the Grand Central Terminal.

"Say, youse're Rookie Dyke, ain't youse?" the other had said gruffly. "Me, I'm Canary Jim."

Clinton's letter to San Francisco had been cunningly guarded in its phraseology, and he, Keith, had not quite known exactly what to expect, but he had taken it for granted that Clinton would meet him on his arrival. This was the first time, however, that he had ever been called Rookie Dyke, and he had never heard of Canary Jim before. It was either, therefore, a mistake, or some sort of a come-on game. The fellow's looks were far from inviting in any case! He had started to push the man brusquely away when the other had spoken again—this time without the slightest movement of the lips, without change of facial expression, and in a voice so low that it was almost inaudible.

"Keith!" And then instantly, in gruff tones again, "Come on, bo; let's hit the subway! Youse can give me the family news when we gets to de dump!"

There had been very few words exchanged after that.

"Wait," Bob Clinton, alias Canary Jim, had said under cover of the roar of the subway. "We can't roll up to where we're going in a taxi, and we can't talk here. We'll have to walk a few blocks after that, but you won't need to be told when you see them that the streets are no place for confidence either. Wait till we get to my place."

From the subway they had traversed a number of streets, and—Keith's thoughts were interrupted by a quick-flung, "This way, Rookie!" as Clinton swung suddenly around a corner, and, shuffling rapidly along, led the way down a cross street that was comparatively deserted. Keith nodded to himself as he followed and fell into step again with the other. There were very few people in evidence here, but Clinton now appeared to be known to everybody they encountered, and to know everybody in turn. They were obviously in the near vicinity of the "dump," and amongst Canary Jim's immediate neighbors.

KEITH pursed his lips a little. A queer lot, and an unpleasant, smelly street—darker, too, it seemed, and more poorly lighted than any of the others! Two lurching figures that appeared suddenly out of the mouth of a dark doorway; a curious looking Jew who supported himself on crutches in the doorway of a small tobacco store; a swarthy complexioned hand-organ grinder with one empty, flapping coat-sleeve, who trudged along with the broad leather strap of the organ over one shoulder and a small, shivering, garishly-bedecked, wizened-faced monkey balanced on what was apparently the stump of the lost arm; and an old woman with face half hidden in a torn and dirty muffler, who slouched by at the edge of the curb—all these and others, even to an urchin or two, gave greeting to Canary Jim. A bit strange! It was as though Bob Clinton had lived here in close companionship with these people all his life!

And now halfway along the second block, Bob Clinton made for the doorway of what, so far as Keith could make out in the shadowy light, was a three-story, down-at-the-heels tenement. Bob Clinton pushed the door open, and Keith, following, found himself in what of necessity must be a hallway of some sort, though it was so black that he could not see a foot in front of him.

"Put yer left hand on the wall, an' follow me," instructed Canary Jim.

KEITH obeyed. The place was musty, and also it smelled pungently of garlic. From somewhere above his head there came a medley of sound, muffled, as though from behind closed doors—the fretful crying of a child, an inebriated voice raised in unmelodious song, the scuffling of feet as though moving on bare floors, a phonograph with a cracked record. He passed a door; and then a few paces farther on the hallway seemed to open out abruptly to the left. But here he halted.

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He could hear Clinton just ahead of him opening a door—and then, the next instant, an air-choked gas jet was wheezing and spluttering, and, moving forward again, he found himself standing in a small and squalidly furnished bedroom.

A cursory glance showed him a rickety chair, a washstand, a cot that had not been made up since last it had been occupied, and a threadbare square of carpet on the floor; but his interest was centered on Bob Clinton. The shuffling, ungainly tread was gone, and in its stead were bewilderingly swift and utterly silent movements; the closing of the door, the sudden opening of a window behind the drawn roller-shade, the window closed again, the shade dropped back into place, the opening of a door that appeared to connect with another room on the left and into which Clinton disappeared for a moment—only to come back, and, with a smile that was no longer the twisted grin of Canary Jim, suddenly clap both hands on his, Keith's, shoulders.

"The windows in both these rooms open on a backyard, and they're only about three or four feet from the ground." Bob Clinton's smile broadened. "I use them myself quite often, but"—he shrugged his shoulders—"conveniences sometimes work both ways! And now we can talk ourselves out. There's the chair or the cot. Help yourself. It's all I've got to offer. That other room there is the same as this one, and it's for you if you want it—but we'll get to that in a few minutes. First though—

about Allan. I tried to write you, but words somehow never seem to mean anything when some one you think a lot about goes out. It leaves the heart sore, Keith, and I—" He turned his head abruptly away. "Sit down, won't you?"

Keith's hand found the other's and held it in a long clasp. He made no other answer. There was no need for one. He sat down in the rickety chair.

Bob Clinton perched himself on the edge of the cot.

"We'll get down to business," he said—and cleared his throat. "That letter of mine to you in San Francisco must have left you pretty well up in the air, and so far tonight I've no doubt you've been guessing harder than ever; but before we get to that, there's a question I want to ask you. I know from your letters pretty well all the details of what happened, but what I particularly want to know now is whether or not anything further has been heard of the *Malola* since the night Gur Singh escaped from her?"

Keith shook his head.

"Not a thing," he said tersely; "not a sign or vestige of her."

Clinton's brows drew together in puzzled lines.

"Does that essentially mean that those four men are still floating around on her, then—that they couldn't be anywhere else?" he asked.

Again Keith shook his head.

"No," he said bitterly; "far from it! They could be almost anywhere. It simply means that the *Malola* hasn't been reported from any place where there was a wireless or cable communication. There are no end of things they could have done. For instance, we know from Gur Singh that they were going to disguise the schooner, and they might easily have put in at some out-of-the-way place where, since nothing would be known of Allan's murder, no suspicions would be aroused. They might even sell the *Malola* in such a place on some specious pretext or other, and then clear out on some other craft. The Archipelago is vast enough, the Lord knows, to make it more than likely a transaction such as that would not come to the knowledge of any one in a position to put two and two together for months on end. On the other hand, of course, knowing nothing of navigation, and failing to pick up any one, white or native, from some island to help them out, they may be sailing aimlessly

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around out there yet."

"I see," said Clinton. "You don't think, then, that it is beyond probability that they are now—well, say, here in New York?"

KEITH leaned sharply forward in his chair.

"I most certainly do not!" he exclaimed tensely. "But there is something more than mere generality behind your question. Do you mean that you——"

"Yes," said Clinton quietly, "if it is not a physical impossibility that they *could* be here, I think that they, or some of them at least, are in New York now."

Keith was on his feet.

"You've seen them?" he cried hoarsely.

"Yes, I think so—two of them," Clinton answered gravely. "Coupling what you've just said with the presumption that New York was where they intended to make for, I——"

"There isn't the slightest doubt about where they were making for," Keith interrupted swiftly. "That's why I'm here! There was nothing to make them change their minds. They couldn't even have a suspicion that Gur Singh overheard their plans. So they're ahead of me, are they? Well, I was a long while getting on my feet, but"—a queer whiteness came into his face—"I'll try now to make up for lost time! Go on, Bob! What do you know?"

"Not so much as I wish I did," Clinton replied soberly. "But we'll get to that in a moment. In order to understand what I have to tell you, and also to be in a position to make an intelligent decision on a proposition that I am going to put up to you, you've got to know, well—let's put it in a nutshell this way—why temporarily you're Rookie Dyke and I am Canary Jim, and we are both at this moment occupying a room in pretty nearly as unhallowed a crime hatchery and nest of crooks as is to be found anywhere on the East Side. So let's go at it from my end first. Right?"

Keith pulled his chair closer to the cot and sat down again.

"Yes," he said. "I'm pretty foggy on everything since I got your letter in San Francisco."

Bob Clinton was silent for a moment staring at Canary Jim's aggressively-checked peaked cap which he had just removed from his head.

"I was wondering just where to begin," he said. "I think perhaps I ought to make it clear first of all that I have absolutely no connection whatever with the local police or detective force. I am, as you know, in the Secret Service—which is very distinctly a different matter. Federal matters alone are within our jurisdiction. I have been with the Department a good many years now; but, with the exception of two or three of the heads, there is no one who knows that Canary Jim is not all that the underworld thinks he is—otherwise Bob Clinton's life would very certainly come to a most speedy and unpleasant termination. I don't want to make a long story of this—I just want you to understand the situation clearly. It has taken me years, of course, to establish the character of Canary Jim both here and in other cities. When I am not working on a case where Canary Jim's help is of any value, that is, when I am living my own normal life and Canary Jim disappears for perhaps months at a time from his usual haunts, the dope is 'planted' that the police are taking such a warm interest in his activities that he has ducked for cover to some other city until the storm has blown over. As this is a well-worn habit of the fraternity of those outside the law, it occasions no surprise, arouses no suspicions, and Canary Jim is free to bob up again when he pleases. Is this all plain to you?"

Keith smiled grimly.

"I can see how Canary Jim gets away with it," he said.

Bob Clinton smiled in turn.

"All right!" he said. "Well, just about the time your letter arrived, we started in to tackle one of those big continent-wide jobs the Department sometimes has to face. I would not be at liberty to tell you what it is unless there were something to justify me in doing so, which, at the moment, there is not—but the head and

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front and brains of what I'll call the 'combine' seemed to be here in New York. So Canary Jim, who was supposed to be away somewhere in modest retirement, reappeared upon the scene, permitting it to leak out through the underground exchanges that he had temporarily at least patched up his differences with the police. And that's why I've been Canary Jim for some time past, am so at this present moment, and will be until the case I have referred to is cleared up—you understand?

"Now, getting back to you, having reported the full details of the murder to the authorities in Surabaya, as you did, and having given them all the information furnished by Gur Singh, the police in the big centers all over the world, and particularly here in New York, have been, and are, of course, on the lookout for your men. But that does not mean that the police will necessarily be successful—unapprehended criminals are by no means rare! Obviously, therefore, no available outside effort was to be ignored. For example, Canary Jim, being in the full confidence of his fellow citizens of Gangland and with the entrée into every den and dive in New York, opened up a very promising prospect, and one with better chances for success, perhaps, then the police had; and, on top of that there was also—yourself. When you stated so categorically in your letter that you were coming here to take a personal part in——"

Keith flung out his hand abruptly. There was something of self-deprecation, more of finality in the gesture.

"I don't want to be misunderstood," he said. "It has nothing to do with heroics. It is something one does. Allan would. Police, or no police, I am going to take a hand in this myself. Nothing could alter what I said in my letter."

CLINTON nodded sympathetically.

"I know," he said; "and I was so well convinced of it that I—but wait a moment! One of the vital factors in the problem was, and is, to preclude any warning leaking out that would drive our quarry scurrying away from New York before anybody could close down on them; and that's why I wrote you not to come here with any blare of trumpets, and above all not to bring Gur Singh with you, for——"

"A decision," Keith broke in, "to which Gur Singh took violent objection—and I'm not sure but that I agree with him, though, of course, on your say so, I left him behind. He took it pretty badly. In fact, for the first time in all the years he's been with us, he got a bit out of hand. It's a personal matter with him, too. He said he was the only person who had seen and could recognize the four—for, as you know, it was too dark on the beach that night for me to see any one of them distinctly."

"Who do you think would have been recognized *first*, if he had come here?" inquired Clinton softly. "The four by Gur Singh, or the East Indian by the four? No, it wouldn't do, Keith! I admit that you would not be recognized, but we would be playing our hand very badly if we failed to credit them with having discovered who the owners of the *Malola* were. They would know your *name*. And once it become known that you and Gur Singh were here, one of two things would have happened. A bullet or a knife would very promptly have eliminated you both as potential enemies and witnesses; or else, if that could not be managed safely and swiftly, they would simply have quit New York. Gur Singh's description of the four is quite good enough to go on; it would be only playing into their hands if he was seen here."

Again Keith smiled grimly.

"Well, anyway, he didn't come," he said; "and there's been no noise about my arrival either—which is the point you are making. I can see the reason for that now, in view of Canary Jim! But what follows? Is Rookie Dyke the ultimate answer?"

"That is for you to decide," Clinton

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answered seriously. "I have left it open to you. I mean that, though it might appear to be otherwise, you are not in the slightest degree committed to the character of Rookie Dyke. Listen, Keith!" he leaned earnestly forward. "You were the greatest problem of all, for I knew you were not to be calmly set aside to enact merely the rôle of an interested spectator. It worried me a lot. I didn't come to any decision until your cable reached me saying you were sailing. You see, in the meantime, there was always the chance that I, or the police, might round up our men, and that, of course, would automatically have solved the problem. Nothing like that, however, happened; in fact, it was not until the night before last that I had any reward at all for the personal search I had been making as Canary Jim—I'll tell you about that presently. But meanwhile you were actually at sea and on your way here, and I was forced to come to some definite decision regarding you. Well, I made it; and, incidentally, in so doing, I might say I was somewht influenced by the fact that, both from the standpoint of danger to you and on account of the possibility of putting our men on their guard, I did not like the idea of having your arrival in New York become publicly known. Anyway, I decided, then, to give you the chance, if you wished for it, of getting into the game in perhaps a good deal deeper personal way than even you had either intended or anticipated. Now I obviously dared not communicate what I had to say to you by wireless, nor did I dare say anything in a letter which, if by the odd chance it went astray, would jeopardize the Department's plans by unmasking Canary Jim; so I simply wrote you to forward your belongings to New York, to acquire the sort of duds you are wearing now, and to come along yourself on a certain transcontinental train which I specified."

KEITH nodded.

"It was quite enough," he said. "I knew something was up, and I was perfectly satisfied to carry out your instructions to the letter—that is, as best I could. I tried to profit by that lesson of yours at Nukualofa. I christened myself with a new name of my own choosing, but it appears now that I am Rookie Dyke."

"Or Keith Wharton," amended Clinton gravely. "You mustn't forget that the die isn't cast yet. If you decide for Rookie Dyke, you can consider yourself already established as an altogether unsavory character here in the underworld, and, incidentally, with a fairly effective 'open sesame' everywhere. As soon as I had made up my mind to put the proposal up to you, I created Rookie Dyke and passed the word around that he was an old pal of mine in the West with a police record, who was ducking for cover, and was going to lay low for a while in New York. Then I moved in here a few days ago, because where I was before I had no room for you. It's the same old yarn, but the one that is never questioned; the same old plant, the one Canary Jim uses—when it gets too hot in one place the fallen brother goes into retirement somewhere else. That's why Rookie Dyke has unostentatiously blown into New York, and is sponsored by Canary Jim. But Rookie Dyke does not need to stay. He can be non-existent in the next half hour if he so elects—while I pass along the word that the police were so hard on Rookie's heels that he had no use for a stop-over ticket. Now, then, it's a question of the pros and cons. You did not see the faces of any of those men on the beach that night because it was too dark; so, by the same token, as Rookie Dyke, you can spend your days and nights

searching for them quietly in the dens and dives and saloons here without any chance of being recognized yourself. You and I and the police have their description to work on—they have nothing. But you must understand that if you carry on as Rookie Dyke you must do so independently of, and unknown to, the authorities;

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for, remember, you are being sponsored in the underworld by Canary Jim, and Canary Jim must never, on any account, be linked up with the police. That may put a different complexion on the whole matter. It is for you to decide. I am not underestimating the police for an instant. They may fail, and so may you; but, as Rookie Dyke, you have——"

"With a chance to be Rookie Dyke," said Keith, with a short, mirthless laugh, "I'll be Rookie Dyke until the last one of those four men is nailed. Had you any doubt about it?"

Clinton grinned suddenly.

"Not the slightest!" he returned imperturbably. "It doesn't look like it, does it? But, nevertheless, I had no right to commit you irrevocably either way. Very well, old man—from now on, you're Rookie Dyke. You won't have any difficulty in playing the part, except for the personal discomforts you'll have to put up with. You don't have to talk about yourself. Just keep a close mouth. Nobody expects you to spill your own secrets. You're keeping away from center stage and the police spotlight just now—that's your line. Though you have come upon evil days, you were a gentleman once, which will account for your grammar, and the fact that you have never acquired the vernacular. Don't give any one a hint as to what you are after; don't trust any one; don't ask any leading questions—this is where you will have to depend on your ears and eyes alone. And now let's get down to cases. I was fairly sure the night before last that I saw the two men Gur Singh described as Blackie and the Weasel; I don't think there is the slightest doubt about it now that I know you believe it was possible for them to have reached here even quite some time ago."

FOR the second time Keith came impulsively to his feet.

"Where did you see them?" he demanded tensely.

"In Morissey's Palace," Bob Clinton answered. "That doesn't mean anything to you at the moment, though you'll probably become well enough acquainted with it, as well as with a good many other places of the same sort, before you're through; anyway, it's a dance-hall that camouflages more than one of the major iniquities."

"Yes? And then?" Keith was biting off his words now.

Clinton made a dry grimace.

"The luck didn't hold," he said. "There was quite a crowd there, and a lot of drinking at the tables. When I first noticed them they were three or four tables away from me. A minute or so later they got up to leave. I followed them, of course; but, as I got to the door, a half-dozen people, coming in from the street, wriggled in between us, and I only reached the sidewalk in time to see the two drive off in a car. I was back there last night transacting"—Canary Jim's twisted smile came suddenly into play again—"a little private business of my own, but I didn't see them."

Keith was silent for a moment.

"Well, that's no reason why they won't be there, or in some other likely place *tonight,*" he said at last crisply. "The main thing is that we know that they are here in New York. It can't be more than ten o'clock. What about it—now?"

"I was going to suggest it," said Clinton. "In any case, the sooner Rookie Dyke makes acquaintances the better. Morissey is one of the élite you've got to know. We'll start in there, and then drift—" He stopped abruptly.

Keith whirled around to face the window. There was a curious sort of scraping noise on the sill, accompanied by what seemed to be something metallic banging against the pane.

Clinton jumped up, and opened a small wall cupboard at the foot of the bed.

"That's all right!" he said. "It's Beppo."

"Beppo?"

"You'll see!" said Clinton—and from a shelf in the cupboard, untidy with the litter of a few pieces of crockery, a milk bottle, some bread and a piece of cheese, obviously Canary Jim's larder, he produced a somewhat blackened banana; then, stepping across the room he raised the roller shade, and threw up the window.

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KEITH stared. On the window-sill was a small, chattering monkey, whose head was adorned with a jester's cap, and whose body was clothed in gaily spangled attire. He recognized the creature at once from its dress—it was the same monkey he had seen perched on the shoulder of the one-armed organ-grinder out there on the street a little while ago. The monkey was well trained! As the window went up the monkey doffed its cap and extended a large-sized tin cup.

A smile that had flickered across Keith's lips vanished. There was something more than the mere antics of a trick animal involved here. From the cup Clinton extracted a piece of paper, presented the monkey with the banana, closed the window, pulled down the shade again, stepped abruptly under the gas jet, and stood there frowning as he studied the paper in his hand.

And then as Keith watched, his eyes questioning, Clinton looked up suddenly.

"Beppo belongs to Tony Larfino, that organ-grinder we met on the street," he said. "He pays me an occasional visit—for cause. Hence the banana. Tony lives in the basement below us."

"Yes, I recognized the monkey," Keith nodded. "But Tony was going in the other direction, as though, since I know now he lives here, he was setting out for a night's work. That's rather queer, isn't it? Do they allow hand-organs to be played all night on the New York streets?"

Clinton was staring at the paper in his hand again.

"I can't say," he answered a little absently. "Not being a policeman I'm not up on the city regulations—but I imagine not. In any case, Tony doesn't play on the streets at night. He seems to have a pull that gets him into pretty nearly every dump in town."

"You mean that they let him play in dance-halls and——"

"Saloons, dives of all sorts—yes!" Clinton shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't known him long, only since I've moved in here, but I've a pretty well-grounded suspicion that hiding behind this organ-grinder and his versatile Beppo is one of the biggest dope peddlers in this part of the country. However, be that as it may, he has done me several good turns, and he'll be of incalculable help to you. He can visé your Gangland passport almost anywhere. I'll put you next to him tomorrow."

"Why not now?" suggested Keith. "He apparently came back home for some reason or other."

"He has!" Clinton laughed grimly. "And that same reason will keep us home, too. You might as well chuck your things into your room there, and put in the rest of the time tonight in hanging up on the wall any pictures or works of art you happen to have brought along!"

Keith stared at the other in a puzzled way.

"Something has happened—a rather disastrous set-back in my work," Clinton said gruffly. "And, besides that, without an iron-clad alibi, a very good chance of Canary Jim's underworld career being ended forever, amen! Here, read this!"

Keith took the piece of paper. He made out the badly scrawled words with difficulty:

You hava da squall with da Moke last nite. Some guy just killa da Moke in da lane of China Jack. Da bulls is out and da gang is sore. You keepa in da house tonite sure.

"Well?" prompted Keith.

Canary Jim was smiling his twisted smile again.

"The altercation last night was a bit of stage-play between the Moke and myself," he said. "The police will be on the rampage because the Moke was one of their most trusted stool-pigeons; also the Moke's crowd, who never dreamed their pal was betraying them right and left, will be out hot-foot for revenge. And Canary Jim was known to have had a row with the

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Moke last night! Yes, I guess I'll need a home-alibi tonight. We'll probably have a visit from several gentleman from headquarters before long, to say nothing of the Moke's gang, once they think the coast is clear, and —listen! Clever devil—Tony! It won't be his fault if we make a misplay!"

Keith listened. From below, faintly, but none the less audibly, came the whiney notes of a hand-organ plaintively grinding out an old-time familiar strain:

Home, sweet Home,
. . .There's no place like Home . . .

Chapter V

UNDER COVER

THREE nights had passed since the Moke's murder, nights that Keith had spent in ceaseless vigil—and had spent futilely.

Thanks to Canary Jim's sponsorship, and, in no little measure, to Tony Larfino's ready good offices and "introductions," the underworld had ungrudingly opened its doors to Rookie Dyke; but there had been no sign of the men he sought. From place to place, from den to dive he had gone; he had moved amidst a sordidness that he had never dreamed existed; vice-holes hidden deep beneath sub-cellars, crime-cradles that reared a monstrous progeny, had received him into their unhallowed folds; resorts of specious respectability that but camouflaged mires and wallows of depravity had accepted him as a creature worthy of being enrolled in the list of their unholy clientele. He had lived in a world that shunned the sunlight, in a world where every man's hand was against the law, where criminals, the petty and the great, skulked and hid and plotted, and, at propitious moments, stole forth like rats from their holes to prey upon the unwary, and sink their teeth in such tit-bits of spoil as they could find—but so far he had gone unrewarded in his search except in the sense that, besides familiarizing himself with a locality to which he had been a stranger, he was rapidly establishing himself as one welcome within the intimate precincts of Crimeland, where, sooner or later, he was confident he would at least be of assistance in running his men to earth.

He was not impatient; neither was he in any way dismayed by his momentary lack of success. It was no easy task he had set himself—Crimeland was a big domain. But Crimeland, too, within itself was a domain of whispers. He counted on more than the mere chance of coming face to face with one or all of the four. There were the whispers; and there were always whispers if one listened—and he always listened—listened above all for a whisper about a man with a mutilated hand.

THEY were whispering around him now. He raised his head from his arms that had been outflung across the table, and where one elbow had acted as a mop for a half-spilled glass. Supposed to be hiding from the police of a distant city, and eschewing all further criminal activities until the present hue and cry had died down, Rookie Dyke apparently found comfort for his enforced idleness in a state of perpetual inebriety. It encased him in an armor that was hard to pierce. It justified his constant flitting from one dive to another; it justified—Rookie Dyke. Rookie Dyke was always good for a drink. It made him solid with both the leeches that ran the dives and those that patronized them. But though he bought much for others, and was equally generous in providing for himself, what he paid for on his own behalf was, for the most part, tipsily spilled on floor or table, or surreptitiously found its way to any place other than down his throat.

He looked around him owlishly—and dropped his head again upon his arms. Lugo the Spaniard ran a safe place! Before one could penetrate deeper into the Spaniard's establishment, one was obliged to have one's passport viséd here in this outer room. Half an hour ago he had made a circuit of Lugo's gaming tables and pipe rooms, assuring himself that his men were not there, and then he had returned to his present observation post. Later on, unless luck broke for him here, he would try somewhere else!

The two men hobnobbing over a bottle

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in the corner near him, obviously two old lags and crooks of the lesser breed from their somewhat shabby attire, were not whispering about a man with a mutilated hand. They were whispering, as he had heard many others whispering in the last few days, about—Tiger Claws.

His face hidden in his arms, Keith's brows furrowed. What these men were saying now he had heard a dozen times before—with this or that embellishment. He had even been a frank and open listener on occasions. It was a queer story—though how much of truth there was in it, or how much was mythical and imaginary, he did not know. But there were moments when he was even tempted to believe that this Tiger Claws might actually be one of the four men from the *Malola*. He had nothing conclusive on which to base such a deduction—merely that, according to Gur Singh, some, at least, of

the four had originally been New York crooks.

Keith smiled a little whimsically to himself. Was he snatching at straws? There was of course, the fact that the purported reappearance of Tiger Claws was more or less coincident with the return to New York of at least two, and probably all, of the four who had been on board the *Malola*. But was there actually such a man as Tiger Claws? A man who had never been seen! Did he even exist?

Keith's smile died away. There could be little doubt but that up to three years ago some one that the underworld had elevated to its inglorious peerage and invested with the title of Tiger Claws had imbued that same underworld with both admiration and an awe that was akin to terror, and had brought the police to a state of almost insensate fury at their inability to apprehend him.

THE details of scores of crimes now being resurrected and delectably recounted were obviously too indelibly stamped on the memory of the underworld to leave any question as to their authenticity. And if Tiger Claws had never been seen, and had never been recognized, it was, according to the underworld, because he was a man of many faces and a master of disguise, and because those of his victims who might have identified him never lived to do so. He had preyed not only upon society, but had snatched from his fellow crooks, as well, many a juicy plum that they had already filched at the risk perhaps of their own necks. He had robbed and pillaged when and where he would. He had killed without compunction. And then, suddenly, three years ago, he was heard of no more.

And now as suddenly, and as mysteriously as he had gone, he was back again—at least so the whispers said. There was no definite authority whereby to establish his return as a fact. Nothing, apparently, to go on—no one to say what he was like, what he had done, when he was seen, where he lived. But the news had spread like wild-fire from one end of Crimeland to the other. The word was out. The underworld knew.

Keith stirred now a little impatiently. The idea intrigued him. There was the undeniable possibility, of course, that Tiger Claws might be one of the four men who had lighted the murderous signal fire on the beach that night; but that such a possibility was at all likely or even worthy of serious consideration was, he was obliged to acknowledge, born purely out of his obsession to find those men. Otherwise, it would never have suggested itself to him—it was worth no more than that—a mere possibility.

SOME one was entering the room. Through half-closed lids Keith's eyes sought the man's right hand, and from the hand his eyes traveled to the other's face, scanning it closely as he scanned every face he saw now. There was nothing the matter with the other's hand, and the man's face did not interest him—the man

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was merely a type, one of the night prowlers that one saw everywhere.

The man was crossing the room in his direction, but, paying no further attention to the other, Keith's head slumped lower on his arms—and then he felt his shoulders being somewhat roughly shaken.

Keith raised his head—and blinked. The man who had just entered was standing over the table.

"Youse're Rookie Dyke, ain't youse?" demanded the other.

"Sure," said Rookie Dyke thickly.

"Well, then, Canary Jim's over at Kinter's dump in the back room, an' he's askin' fer youse," said the man—and passed on.

Keith, as though striving to assimilate this information in a befuddled brain, continued to blink and stare vacantly after the other for a moment, then he rose somewhat uncertainly from his chair and made his way out to the street.

But once on the street, however, the night air seemed to have a magical effect upon him, for, though he continued to usurp more of the sidewalk than was justly his, he walked swiftly. This was good news, no matter what Bob Clinton wanted him for. He had not seen Bob for two days now. The notes he had left under Bob's mattress still remained there; there had been no note from Bob under Keith's mattress. Bob had not been near their rooms in all that time; neither, until now, had Bob made any attempt to communicate with him. In one sense, he knew that Bob's sudden disappearance had nothing to do with the Moke's murder, for, thanks to Tony Larfino's warning, the alibi which had been established that night had been satisfactory both to the police and to the Moke's gang; but, in another sense, the passing of the Moke was almost certainly responsible for Bob's absence from his usual haunts.

It wasn't far to Kinter's—just two blocks away, with the back entrance on a hidden court—but Keith unconsciously quickened his pace. Whatever the work was upon which Bob, in the rôle of Canary Jim, was engaged, it had received a serious set-back through the Moke's death. Bob himself had said so. It meant—well, it might mean anything. Canary Jim, at best, wasn't a good insurance risk; and Keith, without any word from the other, had become anxious—that was the long and the short of it.

KEITH turned a corner, and, through an unobtrusive door—it was not Keith's first visit to Kinter's—entered a long, narrow hallway that was dimly lighted by a single low-powered incandescent lamp at the farther end. A man's figure confronted him suddenly out of the gloom.

"Who's dot?" demanded the other peremptorily.

Kinter's had the welfare of its clientèle—and its own—at heart.

"Rookie Dyke," Keith answered. "I'm looking for Canary Jim."

"Wot makes youse think he's here?" inquired the man gruffly.

"I didn't—hic!—think; I know he's here 'cause he sent for me"—Rookie Dyke indulged his hiccoughs.

"Youse ain't on the list, but if youse're one of the invites it's all right"—the other's tones became more gracious. "Canary's doin' himself proud in the private room tonight. Youse're the first to show up. It's the last door on the right. Hop to it, Rookie—but if youse lap up much more, youse won't enjoy the whole of the evenin'!"

Rookie Dyke had acquired at least the groundwork of the underworld's amenities. "You go to hell!" he said politely.

He walked up the passage, opened the door of the room indicated, stepped inside—and promptly closed the door behind him. The room was fairly spacious, but made no pretense to any furnishings—save for half a dozen chairs and a table that was generously laden with glasses and bottles. Canary Jim, his feet up on the table among the

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bottles, a fag hanging pendant from his lip, was lounging back in a chair.

"Hello, Canary!" said Rookie Dyke boisterously for the benefit of any one who might be within earshot without—and, crossing the room, dropped into the chair beside Bob Clinton.

"You're coming on!" said Clinton in an undertone and with an approving grin. "You're getting pretty well known, too in the right way, eh? I've heard a lot about Rookie Dyke lately."

"Yes, but I haven't heard anything about you," said Keith earnestly; "and I was beginning to——"

"Let me do the talking," interrupted Clinton, suddenly serious, and lowering his voice still more. "There isn't much time, for you'll have to clear out when my"—he smiled wryly—"guests arrive; in fact, I'd rather you went before they came. I'm all right, nothing to worry about, except that the Moke's death left me in a jam. It was as though the wires had gone down and central didn't answer any more—you understand? I had to get busy—I've even been out of town. If I've any luck tonight this little party I'm giving here is going to act as a repair gang, and fix the line up again—and if they fall for it, it means that I've got to make another little trip away tonight, by midnight, and I don't know how long it will be before I'm back—maybe a day, maybe a week. Now, then, has anything opened up for you?"

"No." Keith shook his head a little grimly. "They seem to be wearing an invisible mantle—especially the man with the mutilated hand."

BOB CLINTON nodded.

"Well," he said, "maybe here's something—and maybe it isn't. I only got it an hour ago. There wasn't any use trying to trail you all over the lot, and there wasn't any time to do it either—that's why I slipped the word around that I wanted to see you here. If you hadn't shown up before I left, I suppose I would have had to put it on paper for you—but that's about the last thing I'd want to do. It's too risky. However, you're here."

"Yes!" said Keith tensely. "What is it?"

"Don't count too much on it," Clinton warned. "It's this: The crowd I'm cultivating at the present moment have been looking for a new hangout—they think the police have been getting a little too inquisitive about the old place. I am afraid"—Clinton's lips thinned—"they keep a lot of questionable merchandise about pending the psychological moment to dispose of it, and they're getting funked about a raid. Two of them were talking it over in my presence. This was about an hour ago, as I said. It seems they had had Old Cully's place in mind. You don't know Old Cully, and it doesn't matter. He died last week, and I won't speak ill of the dead further than to say he was probably the cleverest damned scoundrel that was ever connected with the dope ring here in New York, and that the narcotic squad probably loved him less than any man that was ever born because they could never get the goods on him. Well, one of the two chaps that were with me said it was all off about Old Cully's—that his room had been rented the day after Old Cully had cashed in. Very naturally the chap tried to find out who this new tenant was that had nosed him out; but all that he was able to discover—I'm giving you the conversation in tabloid form—was that the man was sick or something, an' that he was a stranger, a queer looking gink with a bald head and a face so long that it looked as if it had been stretched out like a piece of elastic!"

Canary Jim's fag had gone out—he lighted it; his eyes, through the match-flame, holding on Keith's face.

KEITH'S hands tightened slowly—became clenched.

"Gur Singh's 'pull-down' face!" His voice was a whisper. "Whitie!"

Bob Clinton shifted his cigarette dexterously from one corner of his mouth to the other with the tip of his tongue.

"Sounds remarkably like Gur Singh's description of the man," he said quietly.

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"That's why I sent for you. I wouldn't bank too much on it, but it's worth investigating anyhow."

"You saw Blackie and the Weasel the other night," said Keith in a monotone; "and if this is Whitie, that accounts for three of them—that leaves only the man with the maimed hand, who ought to have been the easiest of all to find."

Bob Clinton shook his head.

"No—the hardest," he said. "I think I've said that before, haven't I? You mustn't forget that the man naturally believes Gur Singh will have described him to the authorities, and, even though that was on the other side of the world, you may be quite sure he will take no chances with a distinguishing mark such as that, and he'll never flaunt that hand in public anywhere if he can help it. But if you can run down the bed and lodging of any one of them, the rest of the problem solves itself. The fourth man will appear in due course. When he does, and you know where, either collectively or individually, the whole four of them are to be found—the trap closes, that's all. In the meantime, if this man proves to be Whitie, the one thing to guard against is showing any of your cards until he has blazed the trail to the others' doors; otherwise, if they get suspicious—well, you understand, eh—Rookie?"

"Where's this Old Cully's place?" demanded Keith tersely.

Bob Clinton's voice dropped lower.

"Damn it, Rookie, I wish I were going with you!" he exclaimed impulsively. "But of course"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I can't. You know Morissey's—where I saw, or thought I did, the Weasel and Blackie the night before you came."

"Yes," said Keith.

"Well, you can't miss the other, then. It's on the same side of the street, and in the next block east. It's in a big yard, once a wagon yard, behind a row of brick houses; and right in the middle of the row, and roofed by the second story of one of the houses, there's a covered driveway that leads into the yard. There may be worse hangouts in New York, but if there are, I've yet to hear of them. It's a fierce dump, and it's got ours, bad as it is, backed out of the picture as a crooks' warren. Sol Isaacs, who owns it, never put any gas in because the fixtures would be stolen—and that's literally true. It used to be an old stable, and I suppose that's how it got its name—it's known amongst

the fraternity as the Stalls. There's nothing much ever been done to it except to stick in a couple of front doors to make it look like two connecting houses, and to divide the barn floor and the loft into so-called rooms."

"Do you know which room it is that this man has got now—the one Old Cully used to have?"—Keith was rising from his chair.

"I was interested enough to ask—when I heard the description of the new tenant," said Bob Clinton with a twisted smile. "It's the back corner room of the right-hand house."

"That's good enough"—Keith was biting off his words—"I'll find him, all right."

Bob Clinton, too, had now risen from his chair.

"Listen, Rookie!" he said earnestly. "You can't be too careful—both for your own sake and for mine. Bringing myself into it sounds selfish, but you know what I mean. I've told you before. If Rookie Dyke is shown up, it's the finish of Canary Jim, and just at the present moment"—he smiled queerly—"I assure you Canary Jim would be an irreparable loss to his country. All you can hope for tonight is to spot your man. If the fellow proves to be Whitie, you'll be busy enough for the next few days running down the others, and by that time I ought to be able to horn in with you—strong—if you've left me anything to do except pull the police string so that nobody'll ever know who was on the other end of the line. And now so long, Rookie! Sorry youse couldn't stick around."

(PART II in the next issue)

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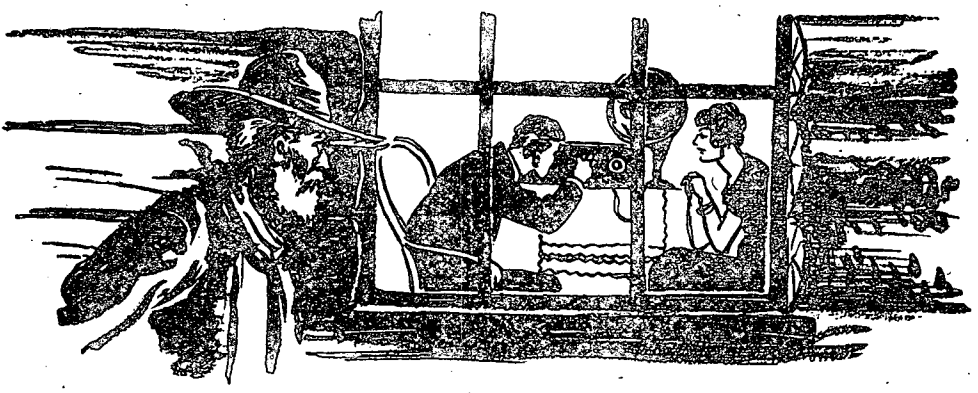

NOISY NIGHT

By BARRY SCOBEE

Author of "The Demands of Strawfoot Bill," "The Rodeo Shirt," etc.

IT WAS ODD, THOUGHT DAD RUNNELS, THAT A POVERTY-STRICKEN HOMBRE WITH A SICK WIFE SHOULD HAVE SUCH A FINE RADIO DOWN IN THAT DESOLATE CANYON VALLEY. AS HE AND HIS POSSE WERE ON THE TRAIL OF TRAIN-ROBBERS, IT SEEMED ONLY REASONABLE TO GET NOSEY—WHICH WAS HOW DAD CAME TO GET HIMSELF FAME AND A NOBLE "RADITOOTER"

FOR days posses had scoured the badlands and river country without a trace of the men they hunted. Now with evening spreading over the empty desolation of hills and canyons a lone rider, who had come on ahead of the posse of which he was a member, suddenly pulled his jaded horse to a standstill, while the expression on his grizzled face was what is called "knocked silly."

"A brass band!" he ejaculated incredulously.

For a moment or two old Dad Runnels listened cock-eared. Unmistakably through the still air the prancing strains of a military march played by a band assailed his ears. A big band, and noisy. So realistic was it that he could all but see chesty tooters of bass horns strutting along a city street.

"Aw!" he grunted in realization. "Nothing but a radio. Reckon I never will get right accustomed to the spooky things."

He got stiffly down from his saddle and clomped to the brink of the canyon that yawned close by. Though he had never previously been just here he knew before he looked what he would see—a little rock cabin down on the canyon floor, the only human dwelling place within six or eight miles in any direction.

"The place I'm headed for, and right under my nose," he told himself as he sized up the scene below in the last light of sunset.

A stranger with a sick wife was down there—so Dad had been told. His mild curiosity about the man was far excelled just now by the desire for water, food and sleep. The house belonged to old Y-Six Granger, the cattle ranchman. Granger kept a tenant farmer in it, when he could get one, to tend an irrigated alfalfa and cane patch on down the canyon. But this present occupant was not a farmer.

"Po' white trash goin' through the country," Granger had explained. "Strayed off down my way and I give him some canned goods and bacon and ten dollars and told him to go there and stay till his wife got better, er I needed the place."

Recalling this now as he listened to the radio's perfect reception, Dad Runnels arrived at an easy conclusion.

"They sho' got a swell raditooter for pilgrims in that kind of a fix!"

He was turning back to his horse when

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his eye caught a thread of light stretching out over the canyon.

"Aerial?" he wondered.

He stepped to one side and bent over a clump of lechuguilla. Driven among the weedy spikes was a stout iron post which served to anchor a heavy copper wire that stretched straight across the canyon to the shadows of the opposite wall three hundred feet away.

"New and shiny and purty as sojer buttons," Dad mused in a kind of grim whimsicality. "Stout, too, and expensive—for supposedly hard up pilgrims. I pine sudden to make their acquaintanceship."

HIS dry boots clomped back to his horse, and he mounted and made his way until he found a road down into the canyon. He was curious, alert. He shrewdly noted that ruts in the little used road had been filled with rock, as if to make it easy for an automobile to get in and out. The door of the little rock cabin stood open to the warm spring weather. The music was still going inside. A beam of light from a kerosene lamp spread through the door and spattered against a car that was headed conveniently toward the road.

Dad dismounted in the shadow of the car. It was a battered machine of excellent make. Old over-size tires had been forced on over the fitted tires, like old socks—a poor man's makeshift to strengthen thin and worn tires. Dad pulled up one of the ragged outer casings and looked at the tire underneath. It was new and tight with air. Stealthily he tried two more wheels, by the sense of touch because they were in the dark. Each had new, tight rubber.

"Umm——" Dad mused.

The music that had drowned the sounds of Dad's approach rose to a thundering crescendo and stopped, leaving the night so still that the tinkle of running water came sweetly from somewhere near. Dad stepped into the bar of light and looked into the house. A man and a woman were there, bending close to the radio with such tense and listening attitudes that old Dad Runnels was caught up in the pinch of the moment and stood listening and watching.

The amiable voice of the radio announcer at once began to fill the silence.

"Well, fans, that starry burst of harmony ends our Sunday evening concert and Mid-East station is now ready to give you the thrill that we promised you last night we would give you this evening. A train robber in person! Get that, fans! Eddie Cotton himself, the only man arrested so far in the great Pacific Lines train robbery of a week ago when five holdups killed the conductor and express messenger and lifted a quarter of a million dollars in currency. Posses are still scouring the western country, and every cop on every beat in every city is on tiptoe to get some of the big rewards that have been offered. So here's Eddie himself. He'll tell you all about it. Eddie Cotton on the air! Stand by a moment."

In the ensuing silence the woman darted up from the radio. She snatched a cigarette from the table.

"God's sake!" snarled the man tensely. "Cut the racket!"

The woman twisted her face down to light the cigarette at the lamp chimney. Dad caught only an impression—a good looking woman full of lithe and passionate vitality, dark, bobbed hair, heavy eyebrows.

"She's no sickling," he thought, as she whirled back to her chair.

GREETINGS, fans!" began a pert and jaunty voice from the air. "Eddie at the mike is right. The bulls is lettin' me do this hopin' they'll be able to lick up an earful. They're crimped, see? Stopped. They want clues. They think if they give me rope I'll spill something! But they'll never get my pals. Never get old Bill and the Coney Cowboy and Roundy and the other one! The dicks is as thick as buzz flies around me and this mike and them names is making their eyes sparkle. But the names I named don't mean nothing to you and these flatfeet. They're just intimate family circle names, see?

"Bill's slick, Bill is. Bill's sittin' pretty, Bill is, and safer than a national bank. He's the cleverest ol' woowoo that ever made his getaway after a naughty deed. Ain'tcha, Bill? You've got your ear to the radio right now, ain'tcha, Bill? You see, fans, Bill is the boss that owns the time clock

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that the rest of us punch.

"And speakin' of punches, how we did punch that iron jool case, wow! Everything worked to a gnat's whisper. Come ten o'clock at night and the big choo-choo stops at the watertank, hunnerd miles from nowhere. And there is our little gang as prompt as factory hands at the whistle. *Putt-putt-putt* goes our machine gun alongside the coaches. Up goes windas, out pops heads. Brakey and conductor with lanterns. *Putt-putt-putt* some more and in pops heads. Too bad the conductor got in front of a bullet. They gotta learn not to get under foot. Pretty soon, *boom!* And the safe's crashed. We stuff two hundred and fifty grand in a mail pouch. Too bad the messenger got nosey. We didn't wanta plug him. Honk-honk and we're off. Bill for the North Pole and the Coney Cowboy for the South Pole and me and Roundy and the other one off in our big airplane to where

me and Roundy has got a car parked. And the plane goes on its way. It was a knockout, that deal of ours! No gang ever done better——"

Dad Runnels, listening breathlessly, was disturbed by a movement of his horse. The animal was backing away from the dropped bridle reins and sidling toward where the water tinkled. Dad heard it begin to drink noisily, then his attention went back to the radio and Eddie.

"Only me—Bill slipped me five thou' for expense money to polish off our show out in the big and naughty world. Got this far, I did, and I'm nabbed with the goods on. Know why I'm nabbed? I was squealed on. Lissen, Bill, the guy that squealed——"

There was a muffled sound as if a hand had been smacked over the speaker's mouth. Dad saw the man and woman raise startled heads and look at each other from fierce, strained faces. The woman reached out anxious fingers to the radio dial. The man's heavy hand closed on her wrist and twisted it back from the dial.

"Leave it alone!"

THEN Eddie's voice again. "One of these dicks here thought I was spillin' too much. The others said let me go on. Lissen, Bill"—and now the jauntiness was gone and Eddie's words fell over one another—"the blond brunette turned me in. Get who I mean! Gawd, you got to get me! The *blond brunette*. Him that you refused to let in on the deal. He's after a slice anyhow. See? A big cut. He told me to get word to you. Only way I knew was to slip you the tip over the air, same as it was slipped to you about the money shipment. Good old radio! I laid to kill the blond brunette. He got wise. He tipped the bulls off about me, to show me and you, Bill, that he means biz. The bulls don't know who tipped them, see? Get to him, Bill, quick. Or he'll slough the works. He——"

Eddie was shut off again. It must have been by control, for the radio stood dumb.

The woman turned on the man.

"'Blondy' Black has squealed to the law!" she said incredulously.

"He'll never squeal again," the man grunted.

He got up, a man above medium height in a sleeveless undershirt, with the shoulders of a wrestler, a thick neck, and a short combative nose. Dad eased back out of the light. "You're Bill!" he thought. The man spoke again, truculently.

"We're clearing out."

"Tonight?" the woman asked quickly.

"D'ye think next week?"

"Take the stuff with us?"

"Take it with us. You'll hold it in K. C. while I go get Black. The 'blond brunette'!" The man chuckled mirthlessly. "Eddie's a wow himself. Put it over that bunch of dicks. Never told a word more than he had to. Get your things together, Gwen. Coney'll be here soon, or we'll meet him on the road. I'll go get the stuff."

Dad backed farther from the light. He stepped across the gurgling little brook and squatted against some bushes. Bill to get the stuff! Well, he'd be at the getting with a gun in Bill's ribs! The whole quarter of a million, minus only five thousand, must be here!

Dad was so thirsty he hurt. He scooped up water in his hat brim and drank. At

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this instant his horse flung out a startled, inquiring neigh that filled the night with sound.

The woman in the house gave a little screech of feminine terror. The man popped into the doorway, stepped out and came forward. He saw Dad's horse.

"That you, Coney?" he asked sharply.

DAD'S wits worked swiftly. He could put the gun on this man, but the woman might get away. The man Coney might arrive any minute and complicate matters. The money might slip through his fingers. Dad decided to bide his time. He took his hand from his revolver and walked out into the patch of light. The man strode up to him and barked words electric with inquiry.

"Who are you?"

The man's big hand went to Dad's jaw and jerked Dad's face around full into the shine of the light. There was a feel of dangerous viciousness behind his strength, a savage hardness in his eye. Dad did not resist, and for that reason his words had a dangerous edge.

"Better give me back my face," he drawled. "Future use for it."

The man dropped his hand and drew back, but not in retreat.

"What you doing here?" he demanded.

"Been getting a drink." Dad's chin was wet to prove his words.

"What you want?"

"Supper," said Dad.

The man Bill eyed him.

"How long have you been snooping around here?" he asked.

"Well," Dad drawled leisurely, looking around vaguely like a ruralite to whom time meant little, "me and my hawss had time to get a drink."

"You by yourself?"

"Three more men," said Dad. "Coming up the canyon. Reckon that's what made the hawss nicker." He looked the stranger over casually. "Reckon you're that tenant of Granger's. We're one of the posses that's been out hunting for the train robbers for the last few days. We sho' would appreciate supper and a place to sleep. My name is Runnels."

"Mine's DeMyer," replied the man shortly.

The woman had come to the door. DeMyer looked at her, and back to Dad.

"My wife——" he began. "We're here for her health. I don't know if she'd want to cook supper for four men."

"I'll say she wouldn't!" vouchsafed the woman insolently.

"I can cook," Dad offered persuasively, not to be sent away so easily. He began to wheedle. "I can pull a right good meal off a stove. Us four possemen haven't had a bite since about cock crow this morning. I know old Y-Six Granger. I reckon he'd appreciate if his tenant would feed us. Besides that, we'll pay you two or three prices."

Dad waited in big-eyed innocence. He believed DeMyer would not wish to antagonize a posse. And he guessed right, for DeMyer abruptly melted.

"Oh, all right," he said sourly. "But you can't stay all night. No place for you to sleep."

"We can sleep on the ground," said Dad. "But we wouldn't want to insist. Where's the woodpile and the cookin' stove?"

A WHILE after this diplomatic truce went into effect Dad Runnels slid a pan of biscuit into the oven and toted up the supper on his fingers.

"Three cans o' tommytoes stewin' on the stove. Likewise cawn. Cawfee b'ilin'. Bacon sliced and in the skillet. One pan o' biscuits in the oven. T'other ready to go in when theh's room. Reckon that's all till these other fellers arrive."

DeMyer chuckled. He and his wife lolled on an old cot in one corner of the little kitchen. They were highly amused at Dad's droll way of talking and at his puttering around at the supper getting. It was plain that they had learned to laugh at hick characters on the stage. And Dad did his best to keep them entertained and at their ease. He was proving himself to be an artist.

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"So you want to 'git ye a train robber'?" mimicked DeMyer in reference to a remark Dad had made. "What's the big idea?"

"Train robbers, and murderers, ought to be caught," replied Dad soberly. "Besides which, more'n likely theh's some big rewards out for 'em."

"Heard over the radio," said DeMyer, "that they're offering twenty-five hundred a head."

Dad pursed his lips and blinked his eyes in ecstasy, and Mr. and Mrs. DeMyer giggled at his simplicity.

"How much would that be for five?" asked Dad.

"Twelve thousand five hundred," answered DeMyer. "But that's only half of it."

"Eh?"

"They're offering five per cent of all the money recovered. On a quarter of a million that would be another twelve grand and a half."

Dad swallowed his Adam's apple twice without any make believe. The woman laughed delightedly.

"Could you waggle some of that cash?" she asked.

"I could find a rat hole to pound it into, ma'am," Dad allowed.

The two chuckled until the cot shook.

"Go on a spree, would you, grandpa?" smirked DeMyer.

"Spree's right," said Dad.

"Blow it all?"

"Ever' cent."

"Hit up the honkytonks?"

"Hit up a money lender's office," Dad snorted. "Pay off the mortgage on my fifteen-section ranch I been trying for twenty years to get clear o' debt so's I can call my life my own. Then I'd take the receipt in one hand and my hat in t'other and tear down the street on my hawss a yellin' and a weavin' and a wavin'. Spree? I'd be so doggone intoxicated I'd ride clean home a tellin' myself ever' step that my cow money thereafter and henceforth was my own to build up my house with, and buy a good radio, and to go to the next Cattleman's Convention, and——"

DAD saw that he was getting too deep into his own private hopes and stopped. DeMyer, his hard eyes dancing with amusement, started off on another tack.

"These other men that are coming—are they expert manhunters like you, grandpa?"

"Well, don't know as they are," admitted Dad. "Jackson, he's an old cow waddy that's been around this country twenty year. He's a right shrewd tracker and a fair shot. But Fatty Brooks—Fatty's the baggage roustabout at the deepo. Young and frivilous and keeps his hair shined like his shoes. Always shootin' off town stuff. He was set on tagging along with the posses, whichever would have him, on account, he said, of him working for the railroad that was robbed. He thought maybe he'd catch a bandit and get promoted. And the other one, young Del Kennedy. He's only twenty-three, and he's the sheriff of this Terlingua County we're in now."

"Sheriff?" DeMyer's interest picked up a little. "A kid like that a sheriff?"

"Well, his pa was sheriff. Rum runners got him three months ago. Mighty good man. They appointed Del to finish out his pa's term. Out of respect and because the family needed the money. Del would like awful well to make good in this manhunt. He hasn't made any shining name for himself so far. But I'll say one thing, he's got sense enough to keep his mouth shet and learn from older men."

DeMyer got up with his springy walk and stood in the open kitchen door—it was a warm March night and no need for closed doors. He had done this three or four times, listening for the possemen, Dad reflected, or for that Coney Cowboy.

Dad had left his rifle outside with his saddle. No good excuse for lugging it in. But he had kept his belt and old .45 Colt's. It occurred to him now for the dozenth

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time to whip out the gun and get the drop on DeMyer and the woman. But each time he had withheld his hand. It would never do. Two reasons. One was the expected Coney. The other was that DeMyer could never be driven to reveal the cache where the loot was hidden. Not he! Not a man with his hard and reckless face. Dad could read men, and he could read that in DeMyer's short-nosed countenance. Why, the fellow couldn't be tortured into telling, not with the desperate game he was playing for a quarter of a million dollars. He'd simply have to be followed when he went for the money.

Nope, Dad told himself, he'd just bide his time until his three companions arrived. Then he'd slip them the news of who DeMyer was, and of the Coney Cowboy. He'd just step out when they rode up and put a bug in their ears quick. Or even maybe arrange some little plan of action. And pondering deep in himself Dad was hardly aware when the woman spoke.

"Your horse is broadcasting again," she said.

"Whinnying," Dad corrected absently. "Reckon he hears the boys coming—Yup, there they are."

HOOFS were sounding on the road. The posse had divided, the three men with the badly jaded horses to take the longer but easier way, while Dad with a better horse came the more rugged but shorter way around the rocky head of the canyon. Dad was assured that it was no other than the posse by the voice of Fatty Brooks in some of his town stuff.

"Ship ahooey! How's the eats, Dad?" Fatty called.

Dad glanced at the biscuits in the oven and put a stick of wood in the stove. Then he eased out of the door. But DeMyer and the woman stepped out, too, and they were right there when the possemen rode up.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. DeMyer, boys," said Dad. "Get your saddles off and stake out y'r broncs. Supper's on the eve o' breakin'."

Jackson, in the rear, slid from his saddle. Anxiously Dad sauntered over toward him. If he could only say one word to put Jackson on guard—but DeMyer stepped that way too. He was no fool. He wanted to scan each man.

The tired men dragged their saddles off and dropped them. They left their rifles in the boots, and they pulled off their belts and revolvers and threw them down on the saddle heaps. Dad's presence was a recommendation to them that everything was all right here. Besides this was just a remote shack with a hard-up pilgrim with a sick wife. What could be wrong?

They led their horses across the little ditch to stake them out. Dad started to follow, ready to whisper a word or two to the handiest man, and something on the stove boiled over. When that happens it's up to the cook to run for the stove. An unwritten law the world over. And Dad ran.

WELL, that chance to put the boys wise was gone up in smoke—Dad Runnels told himself disconsolately as he shoved pans around on the stove and scraped off burnt corn. He'd have to catch an eye when they came in and tip them the wink, get them on guard, and then they'd help to make an opportunity for a bit of private talk.

He heard them wash at the brook and talk with DeMyer about the spring at the foot of the headwall from where the water flowed. Then they came to dry on a bath towel that Mrs. DeMyer got for them. Dad tried to catch an eye as they crowded into the little kitchen. But DeMyer had young Sheriff Del Kennedy engaged in talk, Jackson was too shy in the presence of strangers to look around much, and Fatty was occupied with the supper being placed on the table and with Mrs. DeMyer's figure.

"Whew, look at them biscuits!" Fatty exclaimed in his best society manner, for her benefit.

"Real Southern hot bread," responded Mrs. DeMyer flirtatiously. "I'd rawther have two of those for pets than—than all the train robbers at large, wouldn't you, Mr. Brooks?"

"They're easy to tame," said Fatty, falling hard. "Yuh kind of a stranger around here, ain'tcha, Mrs. DeMyer?"

Dad snorted inwardly. Fatty was goin' to be plumb useless.

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The DeMyers joined the men at supper. As the lady said to Fatty, they couldn't have been kept away from such biscuits with the hook. Dad kept on trying to catch an eye. But DeMyer was alert, and Jackson ate without ever a look up from his plate, Kennedy was too weary to notice much of anything, and Fatty prattled his town talk to Mrs. DeMyer and split biscuits expertly with his spoon.

Dad grew uneasy. That Coney Cowboy might be lurking outside ready to interfere. He might already have removed the boys' guns. Or he might be taking the loot away to safety. Or at any instant this thick-necked and foxy DeMyer might pull a gun from some hidden place—he had no gun in sight anywhere—and cover them.

It occurred to Dad in this milling of his thoughts that he didn't have to tip the boys the wink. Just finish supper, wash the dishes, and tell them that DeMyer didn't want them to stay all night. Then ride quietly away. When they were out of hearing of the house Dad could stop them and explain the situation. They could leave their horses, sneak back on foot, and watch for DeMyer to get the loot, then stick a gun in his ribs. In Coney's too, if that mysterious individual had arrived.

BUT the plan had its drawbacks. The foxy DeMyer would be certain to listen to make sure they really rode away. Thus they would have to ride so far to get out of hearing that before they could walk back DeMyer might grab the money, jump into that ready and waiting car, and be off. Then they would all meet on the road and the posse would have to shoot up the car, with the woman on board.

Dad's blood bulged hot and ebbed cold at the idea. No, nope, that plan would never do.

Unexpectedly DeMyer pushed back his chair. He had finished. The others were about through. Panic smeared itself through Dad. Here something was likely to start any minute and his men were not warned! It was the black fear of helplessness that had hold of him. And it drove him to action.

He crooked his leg under the table and gave Fatty a little kick, since Fatty was nearest to him. Dad was suddenly bent on doing something besides waiting passively to catch an eye. Fatty, splitting a biscuit and smiling at Mrs. DeMyer, moved his leg over a little. Dad reached farther and gave him a digging motion.

"Hi, Dad!" protested the fat boy. "Quit scratchin' your toe on my shin."

"'Scuuuse me!" cried Dad. "I'm tryin' to ease the ache in my old bones by settin' cross-laigged. Reckon I bumped ye."

Dad's wits were in a whirl. For a moment he couldn't think. Then through the maze he began to see a way. He'd crack down on 'em with something over the DeMyer's heads. He'd say something that they'd know wasn't true. Ah, he had it! He'd say:

"Well, men," he'd say, "Mr. DeMyer says he'd ruther we didn't stay here tonight—no beds, sick wife. So we'll go ahead and carry out the plan we discussed before we separated, when I come on here by myself."

No plan had been discussed. So the statement, smack out of the blue, should make 'em sit up and take notice.

Dad thrilled at the prospect of danger. His hand went to his gun. If one of these sleepy possemen made a false step trouble was bound to start. And Fatty was just about the bright lad to spill the beans. But Dad boldly leaned back in his chair and waded in.

"Well, men," said he, "Mr. DeMyer says he'd ruther we didn't stay all night. No beds, sick wife. So we'll wash up the dishes and pr'ceed to carry out that there plan we discussed."

"Eh?" said Fatty, puckering his brow. "I didn't hear no plan discussed."

"You rusty dumbbell!" bawled Dad. "You never hear nothing. I'm sick and tired o' your town chatter. You would of heard if you'd rode along with us 'stead

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o' loitering behind a quarter of a mile, asleep in y'r saddle. You—you fat town urchint!"

JACKSON, and young Kennedy, and Fatty Brooks froze in their chairs. Old Dad Runnels talking like that! Peaceful old Dad Runnels who never used a harsh word to anybody? Besides, Fatty hadn't fallen back nor slept in his saddle.

"Ouch!" said Fatty blankly.

"You," said Dad to him, "you'll ride around with Jackson to 'Dobe House canyon and tell the other posses at B Bar B ranch that we're giving up this fool goose chase and goin' home."

'Dobe House canyon was a hundred miles away. Dad knew that the three men knew it. And there was no B Bar B outfit in the country.

The silence was pregnant with suspense. Then the cowwaddy Jackson rose handsomely to the cue.

"Suits me," he drawled indifferently. "As I said, I been wantin' to see Bib Tucker over to B Bar B."

Del Kennedy never batted an eye at the fictionizing. Fatty reached under the table and reminiscently scratched his leg where Dad had prodded him. Dad felt a surge of great relief.

"And you, Del," he went on more naturally to the young sheriff, "you ride over to Granger's—ain't more'n ten mile from here, eh, Mr. DeMyer?"

"Six or seven," said DeMyer.

"You ride over there, Del, and phone to Marpine fo ra service car to come out and take us home in the morning. Too far to ride in the saddle. Hawsses can be drifted home later on. And Jack, you and Fat can come on over from the B Bar B in the morning and we'll ride to town in the same car."

Jackson nodded.

"Grangers aren't at home," said Del Kennedy.

"They been spending the winter in the city," Dad agreed. "But old Y-Six comes back ever' other week to see if the ranch is still there. He was back the day after the train hold-up. That was when I seed him and he mentioned about the DeMyers being here. He went back right away, but I reckon he left somebody on the ranch."

"His regular Mexican family," Kennedy replied. "And a white fella that blew in from Oklahoma two-three weeks ago. Fella that has ridden a lot in rodeos. He's been at Granger's breaking horses. And they say he sho' can ride 'em."

"You'll be able to get in the house and phone," said Dad.

At the mention of the rodeo rider at Granger's, which was the first he had heard of the man, Dad comprehended who the Coney Cowboy surely must be. The Coney Cowboy and this rodeo rider were one and the same man.

"And me," Dad went on, "I never was so wore out shapin' myself to a saddle. I'll stay right here for the night—with Mr. and Mrs. DeMyer's kind consent."

DeMyer's hard eyes bored at Dad, no doubt taking in the old man's weariness and considering the probability of his sleeping soundly. Dad returned the stare with sleepy innocence.

"I don't snore no louder than the average," he wheedled.

"Oh, all right," said DeMyer. "But the wife and I may disturb you. We're going to pull out. Be packing up tonight for an early start. Too lonesome here for her. And she wants to consult a doctor."

"Don't worry about me." Dad replied. He got up from the table. "Well, you boys scamper along. Keep y'r eyes peeled for the bandits and use y'r heads about the shortcut to the B Bar B so's you won't be wanderin' around in the hills all night. Me, I'll warsh up the dishes and turn in."

DEMYER, Dad observed to himself once more, was nobody's fool. He sat in the door after the three horsemen rode away, evidently to make certain that they really rode away. Dad listened, too, the best he could over the tinkle of dishes and cutlery. Would the boys be wise enough to ride out of hearing? Would they be wise enough not to ride clear off? Had

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they comprehended that fake talk? Would they get their heads together and work out the puzzle? Dad asked himself a hundred questions.

DeMyer and his wife, for she sat in the doorway with him, murmured two or three times, brief snatches of words too low for Dad to catch. At last the two of them got up and began to get their possessions together. They did not offer to help Dad with the dishes. They packed an old suitcase with clothing. Dad saw that much through the partition door as he passed back and forth at his self-appointed work. But they had also two big black handbags, and what went into them Dad did not make out.

They finished their task about the time Dad hung up his dish cloth. The man reseated himself in the doorway. The woman took a chair before the radio and tuned in. Dad blew out his lamp, pulled off his boots, called good night, and stretched out on the old cot in the kitchen. He laid his dilapidated hat over his head as if to shut the light in the other room out of his eyes, but he took care to place it so that he could keep his eyes open and watch into the other room without being observed.

Not that he could see much after he was settled—a strip of the bare floor, the woman's daintily shod feet, and the man's arm and shoulder where he sat sidewise in the door.

Dad was heavy with weariness. Almost at once his lids began to sag. He fought to keep them open. The low music from the radio was soothing. After half an hour or so he began to tell himself that if he could only snooze a couple of shakes to dull the edge of sleep he would be able to remain awake afterward. And the next thing he realized was that he had actually been asleep, for his eyes popped open in startled fashion. Something had disturbed him. But he did not move any more than a quail hiding among grass and rocks.

How long had he been asleep? The woman's feet were still visible by the goods-box on which the radio sat, but the man was no longer in the door. Then to Dad's relief he heard DeMyer stepping about softly. It must have been these half stealthy sounds that awakened him. He saw DeMyer's feet come into view. They crossed to an old trunk, and Dad saw most of the man's body as he squatted. He lifted the lid of the trunk and took out a belt with two scabbards and pistols. When DeMyer straightened up the pistols were no longer in sight, but the man's feet were visible crossing to the partition door. They stopped on the threshold, toes pointing toward Dad.

DAD could see, in his mind, the eyes that must be looking down at him, hard eyes, and cool, with no more compunction than ice. Eyes that with that short and combative nose would stop at nothing.

The woman suddenly increased the loudness of the radio, raising a man's voice in song until it was a raucous bellow that filled the little house. It was as if she meant to drown from her ears some sound that was about to happen. Dad's flesh cringed. He expected to hear the blast of a shot, to feel himself wiped out. He wanted to jerk his hat aside and look at the man, and dared only to lie still, breathing deeply and naturally.

Then the man's feet turned and Dad heard him hiss a warning and fling fierce, guarded words.

"Gwen, tame that thing! D'y' want to wake him up?"

The woman switched the radio completely off.

"I thought——" she faltered.

"——that I was going to do for him?" DeMyer laughed an indulgent, grim note. "Had a mind to. If I thought the old bird guessed anything—— We're going to get out of here right now. I don't like the feel of things."

"Dee, what is it?" she asked tragically.

"Oh—nothing." DeMyer spoke low. "Coney hasn't come, for one thing."

"He may be delayed at the ranch."

"Likely. I'll go get the stuff."

Dad saw one of the black bags lifted from the floor.

"Dee!" the woman pleaded. "Let me go with you."

"No! Now, listen, Gwen, don't you get rattled. Nothing outside in the night to bite you. I won't be gone ten minutes. See here, you write a note and leave it on the

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radio. Say we'll be back for it. That'll keep the old geezer from getting suspicious in the morning about us going off and leaving an expensive music box. Keep a stiff upper lip, girl—and keep the music going. He's used to it now and it will be a signal to me that all's well along the river."

DeMyer tiptoed out. His soles crunched on the gravelly ground. The sounds faded out around the corner of the house.

The woman rustled paper and pencil and began to scratch. She spent possibly a minute at this. Then she got up and Dad heard a faint thump as if she had laid a note on the radio and placed a weight on it. This was followed by her moving about here and there, restlessly. Once she sighed deeply. An owl or a bullbat cut past the open doors with a whir of wings and the woman suppressed a cry. Her feet came to the partition door, as if she were looking down at Dad in mute pleading for help.

WHEN she turned away Dad dared to shift his hat a little to see her. She crossed to the open window toward the headwall of the canyon and peered out. She turned back and beat her hands together in nervous distress. Dad understood. She was a city woman terrified by the empty country that lay around her, terrified by the night, by their dangerous situation. She lighted another cigarette at the lamp chimney. Her face was white and drawn. She had taken only two or three draws when Dad's horse across the brook sneezed loudly. She dropped the cigarette and beat her hands again. She set her foot on the cigarette and put it out. Then she went to the window again and leaned out. After a moment of listening she called.

"Dee!"

Evidently there was no answer, for she turned back. Her eye fell on the suitcase and the remaining black bag. Suddenly she picked them up and carried them outside. Dad heard them scrape when she sat them down by the car. Then her footsteps sounded as she made off around the corner of the house.

Dad got up swiftly, took his boots, and stepped through the dark kitchen door. He teetered a few steps away in his sock feet and sat down to put on his boots. Then with remarkable stealth for his sixty-five years of stiffness he moved to the car, found the black bag, and carried it across the creek to where his horse was staked. It was his thought that if the DeMyers should escape he would have the grip with its contents for a clue.

When he stopped by his horse he heard sounds that had not been audible in the house—a vagrant breeze rustling the dry reeds and brush, and the faint roar of the wind, like the drone of the sea, in the little trees and yuccas on the brink of the canyon high above. And then, down the canyon, the stepping of a horse and the lazy creak of saddle leather.

Almost immediately someone stepped or half jumped across the water a short way up stream and came down along the other side of the brook, quietly but rapidly. DeMyer evidently. When DeMyer and the horseman were almost abreast the horseman cleared his throat. Instantly DeMyer, who was not more than a dozen steps from Dad, spoke out, not loudly.

"Coney?"

"Yes!" came a quick, low reply. "What's up?"

"You're late."

"Had to wait till the Mexican family got to bed." The horseman dismounted asking anxiously, "Something wrong?"

"Maybe. Yes." DeMyer moved over to the other man. "We got Eddie's talk all right, like they promised last night. Eddie was hipped with the goods."

"With the goods?"

"Blondy Black blaated."

"Blondy Black! The——"

"Wantin' a slice. We got to get out tonight and shut him up."

"The dirty dog would be shut up now if you'd let me drill him when——"

"Zssst! Not so loud. Man in the house."

"Who?"

"Posse. Four had supper here. Three left."

"That's who I met! Fellow on horse. I

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sidestepped him and let him pass and he never saw me."

"That was their kid sheriff. Going to Granger's to phone for a car. That was their talk, anyhow. The other two went to a ranch called the B Bar B in 'Dobe House canyon."

"What's that?" the Coney Cowboy asked sharply. "Why, Dee, there's no place like that around here."

"The hell!" DeMyer was startled. "But maybe you don't know."

"I do know. I was raised in the West even if you did find me in a two-bit show at Coney. I had this country down in my noodle in two days. No such place as that around here. What have you done, let some hicks put it over you?"

A pregnant silence, then DeMyer said slowly, "Maybe I have. I didn't feel altogether right about the old man's gab. He's asleep in the house now."

"How'd you know he is?"

"Gwen's there. She'll stop the music if he wakes up or anything goes wrong. The old bird got here ahead of the others. He may have heard Eddie's talk. I doubt it, though. But one thing's certain, kid; we're shoving off from this hole in two shakes. You——"

WAIT a minute, Dee." Coney's voice altered sharply. "You said Eddie got hipped with the goods. *With the goods.* I don't fetch you, Dee. I didn't get no goods."

"I don't spill everything, Coney," DeMyers retorted impatiently. "It's none of your business, but I'll explain. When we sacked that express car box I slipped Eddie five grand—ten five hundred dollar bills—to take East and scatter around Cincy and Pittsburgh. Paper that size would soon be noticed. The banks and the dicks would get wise to the numbers on the bills in no time. And while the hounds are bayin' in the East I'd be in the West shoving the stuff for safe money, see?"

"I getcha," said Coney, mollified. "All OK."

"Keep your shirt on after this. I'm going to get the stuff now. All the rest of it, savvy? You stay here and, if any bozos show up, shoot on sight. I'll be back in ten minutes, and—— What's that?"

It was the woman hurrying toward the men, panting, whimpering, half scared out of her wits.

"Dee! Where'd you go to? I couldn't find you. I've looked—oh, I'm frantic."

"Gwen, cut it out! I told you to stay at the house."

"Dee, I got frantic! Grandpa's all right. This country—don't scold me, Dee—in the city, you know I'm all right. But these whispering nights——"

"We'll be out of here in two shakes, Gwen. Coney's here. I'll get the stuff and we'll be off. Two hundred miles from here by daylight. Among towns. Now you stay here with Coney——"

"No. Nor at the house where that old man sleeps. With you, Dee. I'm scared."

"Come on then!" DeMyer spoke nastily. "Tear your stockings in these weeds. Here, step across the ditch here."

DeMyer turned on a flashlight. They got across the water and came toward Dad. Dad stood behind his horse still holding the black handbag. He stroked the animal's shoulder reassuringly to keep it from moving and leaving him exposed. It was a tight few seconds, but the man and woman trudged past, their spotlight picking out a way among the little bushes.

"Good thing for Dad Runnels," Dad communed with himself, "that they're keeping to this side of the ditch, or they'd go close enough to the house to peep in and see that said Runnels is among the missing."

When they were well past he began to edge along in their wake. He disliked to set the handbag down lest DeMyer on his return, or possibly Coney, should spot it with a roving flashlight, or stumble against it in the blackness.

The man and the woman went into the deep shadows at the foot of the wall, near where the head spring gurgled. When he rode in at dusk Dad had observed a shallow cave or shelter just here, formed by the overhang of the rock. Dad had slept in

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such places more than once when caught out at night in cow work.

When Dad crept into the deep darkness he heard the sounds of digging, or pawing, in the shelter. It was the logical place. The floor was probably of the fine wind-blown dust of ages and the ashes of old Indian cooking fires, light and dry stuff ideal for burying loot in, for the wind and the rock rats would soon obliterate any sign.

THE sounds were exactly as if DeMyer were pawing the earthy débris aside with his hands. At the same time someone was stepping about restlessly, the woman. A step or two nearer and Dad was brought up to a sharp stop by DeMyer speaking curtly, though low.

"Cut out the floor walkin', Gwen, you give me the willies."

"Listen here, Dee!" The woman seemed to turn on him in subdued passion. "I'm sick and tired of this kind of life. It's getting my goat."

"It gets you fancy clothes, and shoes and shows."

"I'd rather have less with peace of mind. I tried to get you not to pull this last stunt. We had enough salted down without it. You've promised and promised to quit."

"I'm quitting. I'll pull seventy-five thousand or better out of this. It's us for the highly respectable from now on. Lodges and sewin' bees. I'm tellin' you."

"It had better be," she retorted, "or I'm telling you I'll junk you like a last year's hat and get me a job as cashier in a hash joint, where you found me."

"You're shot to pieces, Gwen, with these whispering nights, as you call 'em."

"And with promises, and suspense, and danger."

"Stow it, gal, stow it."

She said no more, for just then DeMyer's sounds changed, as if he were drawing something from the hole he had scooped.

"One of Uncle Sam's mail pouches sure came in handy," he said with satisfaction. "Stuff's all dry and safe. Ugh, this dust's choking me. Where's the satchel? Here it is, I've got it."

Scratching and other little sounds ensued as if the money were being transferred from a canvas pouch to the handbag. DeMyer gave an ejaculation of increased satisfaction.

"All stowed! Satchel lacks just enough being full to put in a nightie and a shirt or two on top to make it look like the family clothes. We'll take the pouch along to some river, just to keep old nosey Runnels from finding it in the morning. Let's see if we're leaving anything."

The electric torch was flashed carefully. Apparently nothing was left but a hole in the ground.

"OK," said DeMyer, feeling good. "Us for K. C. and points East, till I pay Blondy Black what he's got coming."

Dad scrooged down into the shadows harder than ever before, gripping his .45 Colt's in one hand and the black handbag in the other. Here was a quarter of a million dollars and two men who needed capturing. And a woman in the way. And Dad lone-handed. He broke into a sort of agonized sweat.

"That Jackson and that Fatty Brooks," he thought bitterly, "oughta be here as big as life."

THE man and the woman came along to within almost arm's length. Well, he'd have to let them go now. Follow them to the car, though, and maybe get the drop on them there. Coney, too, or——

At this instant something splashed loudly into the brook. It sounded like a man landing all sprawled out. Whoever it was, he fired a gun, by accident or design. The spit of fire cut the darkness. Immediately two more shots spat into the night near Dad's horse.

DeMyer dropped the pouch and handbag and whipped out guns from his belt. For a few seconds the world seemed frightened to an utter stillness. DeMyer brought it back to normal by a sibilant command to his wife.

"Get to the car, Gwen! Go quiet. Keep down."

She moved off, stooping, making astonishingly little sound. She cut straight for the house, between the hidden gunners. DeMyer waited until she was out of sight, then leaving the bag and the pouch he stole forward into the bushes.

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WHEN presently DeMyer came stealing back a tiny spot of light remained out in the bushes. Dad comprehended. The man had set his flashlight as a decoy for the hidden gunners, an ancient but often successful ruse. DeMyer returned to where he had left the handbag. Dad heard him groping about for it. Then he eased away along the rock wall.

Dad began to follow as soon as he dared, his gun gripped and ready. The radio still was going, fading out and coming back; and the lamp burned. As he moved along, expecting every instant for DeMyer and the gunner in that direction to clash, or to meet peacefully if it were Coney, Dad saw the woman flit between him and the light in the house. And she was moving away from the house rather than toward it.

Abruptly the radio burst into a roar of noise—a voice in a hog calling contest.

"Poooey, peeg, peeg, peegy, pooey!"

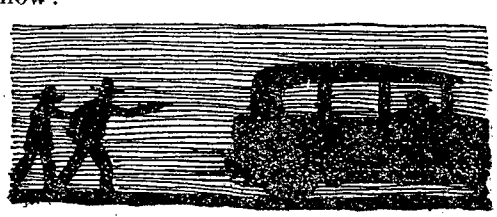
Dad had time for an inward snort of disgust and a complaint.

"This sho' is a noisy night—band concert, and now a splashin' in the crick, and hawgs."

Under cover of the calling he moved ahead. Suddenly he saw a shadowy figure a few steps away. He squatted down. So did the other. Dad luckily found himself shielded by a boulder. He rasped out, "You're cornered, DeMyer! Might as well turn in your guns."

"Fiddle!" came a grunt in Jackson's voice. "Dad, I dern near plugged yuh!"

"Ship ahooey!" Fatty piped up with his town talk from another direction. "D'y' hear me splash the crick out of its bed? I started to step across and the bank caved. Made my trigger finger slip just when I was gonna sneak up on 'em. Where is he now?"



The answer came from an unexpected source. The hog calling was smothered by the burst of a motor. The old car being started! The woman went running through the brush back of the house recklessly calling out, "Dee! Coney! Wait! I was looking for you."

But the car lunged away with a sound of mighty power in the old shell. Fatty fired two or three times at it. The car's headlights flashed on and it kept going. They all stood there staring dumbly. The lights veered and the car began to take the climb up out of the canyon, the headlights turning this way and that around the short curves.

"We've let five grand, as they call it, dribble through our fingers," drawled Dad. "twenty-five hundred a head. Maybe young Sheriff Kennedy'll have sense enough to stop 'em at Granger's."

SUDDENLY shots sounded up on the rim of the canyon. The fleeing car was seen to come to a stop. Curiously it seemed to be silhouetted against some other light. The shooting swiftly became a fusilade.

It was plain to Dad as he climbed the road that a sanguinary fight was in progress. He left the road and made his way over boulders and through stunted oak trees. Reaching the rim and scrambling into the open he made out DeMyer's car and a big truck facing each other in the road like two dogs with flaring and ferocious eyes. And back of the truck a hundred yards was the flash and bark of revolver shots. Two gunmen appeared to be pressing a third one back.

Dad ran toward them, keeping well away from the car lights. When near enough he bawled out, "Hi, who's who there?"

"Dad!" bawled young Sheriff Kennedy in reply.

Dad took a hand in the affair, feeling good to cut loose with a few shots after letting DeMyer get away in the car. Almost at the same time Jackson and Fatty Brooks came puffing up to join in. Their gunfire began to streak the night and add to the uproar.

The two bandits with the odds against them subsided. Their side of the road was all at once silent and dark. The possemen drew together gradually in a loose group, listening and watching. They heard stealthy sounds that indicated the bandits were mov-

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ing back toward their car.

"They'll try to make a getaway in the auto," Dad surmised. "Jack, you and Fatty cross the road and follow them. Push 'em into the light if you can. But take care and don't get shot. Del and I will go back along this side."

They struck out, the old man and the young man together. They had not gone far when the latter asked curiously:

"What's that you're carrying, Dad?"

"Well," answered Dad judicially, "I reckon it's what sassiety calls a Gladstun bag. I dunno."

When they came up even with the car and truck, well away from the field of light, they squatted, watching.

"How happen you come back here?" asked Dad.

"Because that Oklahoma cowboy wasn't at Granger's. I got the Mexican family up and they missed his horse and saddle. I knew from your talk at the supper table that something was doing. So I phoned for a car in the morning like you said and got in the truck and moseyed back this way."

"You used your head, boy."

"When I got this far and saw headlights coming up out of the canyon I stopped the truck and got out in front and waved for them to stop. They stopped all right, and cut loose shooting. That is, they fired a coupla times and by then I was behind the truck. I sho' did get there quick! I binged back over their car two three times and warned 'em to surrender. They crawled out and flitted off into the darkness and came after me, guns a-talking."

IT'S funny," Dad commented, "that they stopped in the first place."

"My lights blinded them, I suppose," said Kennedy. "They'd forgot just how the road was right here and didn't know whether they could pull around at one side and get past or not. Boulders and brush all along here. And anyhow, with me behind the truck I could have poured it on them when they went past."

"DeMyer prob'ly recognized you when he first saw you there wavin'," said Dad. "He likely figured you were by yourself and they could soon eliminate ye. You just about saved the night, son—ssst! There's the woman."

She was coming up out of the canyon on the road. The beam from the truck shining under the DeMyer car lighted up her high-heel shoes and bright stockings as her feet twinkled along.

"Mrs. DeMyer," Dad called out, "you better warn the men off, if you can. We've got 'em sewed up."

She didn't answer. They could hear her panting from the running climb up the steep grade, almost sobbing. She staggered to the side of the car in plain sight of Dad and Kennedy, climbed in and slammed the door. The curtains were on and they could not see her, but they heard the grind of the starter, which was followed by the roar of the powerful motor. She honked the horn imperatively.

"Squawk-squawk, get outa my way!" mocked Fatty Brooks somewhere off in the darkness.

DeMyer and Coney appeared at once in the light across the road from Dad and Kennedy. They were some little distance to the rearward of their car. As they became visible Jackson and Fatty opened a furious fire from at least fifty yards away.

"They're as good as free if they get to the car," Dad rasped. "We can't shoot with the woman in the car."

HE AND the young sheriff of Terlingua County raised up and ran forward firing. Confronted by this onslaught DeMyer and Coney hesitated. Coney dropped flat down on the ground for protection. After a second or two, DeMyer came on, a gun in each hand darting a fiery tongue at Dad and Kennedy. The blast of the shots were noisy in Dad's ears.

"I'm coming, Gwen!" DeMyer shouted.

He came into the road a few steps be-

hind his car, and crumpled down. Instantly,

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he raised up on one hand.

"Go, Gwen, go!" he bellowed. "The stuff's in the car!"

The woman obeyed, as she had on other occasions that night. The car plunged forward. It went with a mighty lunge past the truck, wobbling over boulders and brush. Then it switched back into the road beyond the truck and darted away.

DeMyer continued to sit, leaning up on one arm, in the full glare of the truck's headlight. He had quit shooting when the car started. Coney too. Dad called to Coney to "come in."

"Four men have got ye under consideration, cowboy. No use to get yourself hurt."

The reputed rodeo expert and horse breaker got up and came in sullenly.

"Won't neither one of you need your guns any more," Dad suggested politely.

Coney dropped his, and DeMyer flung his remaining one down on the road with a snarl.

"One of your bullets busted my hip," he said, his face white, "or you hicks would have played hell getting me. But I knew you'd riddle me if I tried to drag myself on to the car."

The four possemen closed in from opposite sides of the road. Dad set his black handbag down.

"We'll get this man on the truck," he said, "and Del and I will take him and Coney to the Granger ranch."

"And phone to Marpine for them to stop the woman," added Kennedy.

"No, we'll let her go," Dad Runnels declared. "If she ever needs it, I'll be a witness in her favor. Spunky woman, her. And Jackson, you and Fatty, if you don't mind, go back to the canyon and get the hawsses. Don't overlook my saddle and rifle. Blow out the lamp in the house. And unhitch that raditooter and bring it along careful on your saddle horns. Aim to fix up my house and I want that music squawker for a souvenir o' this here dog-gone noisy night. Mr. DeMyer won't need it where he's going and I'll buy it off o' him if he'll sell."

But DeMyer was not listening to this talk. He was staring in a kind of shocked wonder at the black bag.

"What's in that?" he asked thickly.

Dad bent over and tinkered with the clasp of the valise. When it came open he lifted out a handful of banknotes done up in bundles, their green and yellow ends visible. He dropped them back and closed the bag.

"Quarter of a million, I reckon," he said, "minus that five grand you let Eddie have. I switched satchels with ye, Mr. DeMyer, when you set it down to go off and put your flashlight in the bushes for a decoy."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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Novel Length Story of Two Lost Witnesses to a Mysterious Cattle Country Will

Me an' Shorty

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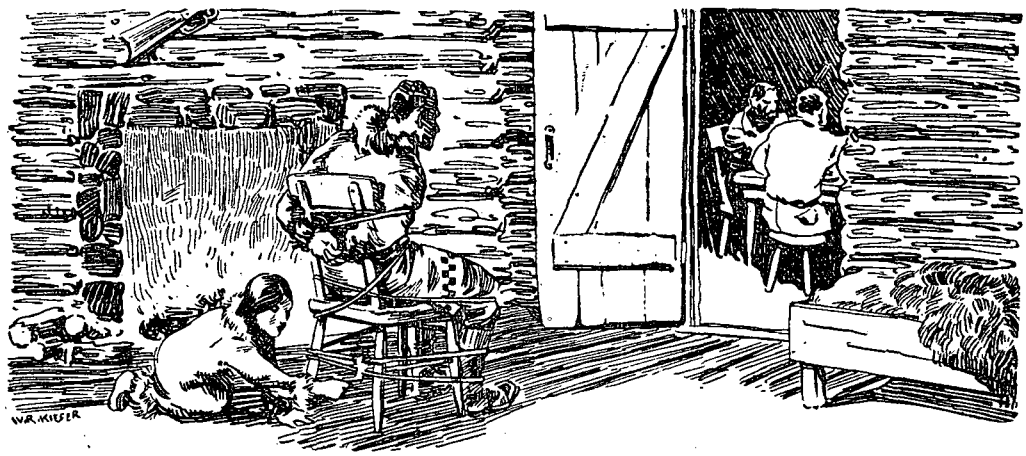

GUNS IN THE SHADOWS

By DEX VOLNEY

Author of "Kinross the Killer," "Snow Melt," etc.

A GRIM COUNTRY—ALASKA. AND GRIMMER FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT LEARN THAT THERE ARE SOME MEN WHO NEVER WERE AND NEVER WILL BE CHECHAKOS EVEN IF THE HAVE ONLY BEEN ONE DAY IN THE NORTH

BUCK GOODSON squirmed helplessly as he was dragged off the ice-plated sledge of Sam McCallum and carried by five parka-clad sourdoughs into the shack of Widow Creevers. There they lashed him fast on a bench with stout dog-gear line, kicking and cursing him meanwhile. The slatternly Aleut woman who dwelt in the cabin and her unkempt offspring, a six year old breed girl, looked on eagerly.

"Shoot down a man like Quartz Smith in cold blood, huh?" snarled Joe Grieg, the biggest and strongest of the group, as he threw off his parka, revealing a pair of forty-fours strapped to his hips. "We'll show you, young chechako prospector, how we handle your breed along this Alaskan Peninsula. You bet we will." And he looked at the other sourdoughs, who nodded grimly.

Outside the shack, a blast of December wind whistled over the snow wastes. It was noon, but the Alaskan sky was like an inverted somber bowl of cast lead, dark with the unbroken solidity of frozen cloud. Immediately to the northward the ragged white mountains of the peninsula brooded in their bleak massiveness, their peaks half hidden in the haze of flying snow.

"Come on to eat, Sam and Joe and Mink, and you others," called the virago from the kitchen. "Come on for eat, while things are hot."

"Before yo' all goes to eat," said Buck Goodson, steadily, speaking to the group of men standing around him, "yo' might explain to me how a daid man could of give a description of who killed him."

"Nor we don't have to, you sneakin' Texas coyote!" retorted Joe Grieg, towering over the captive in his massive and brutal strength. "But I will. Poor Smith, who was my pardner, scrawled it on an envelope with his dyin' strength. It's you, all right. Brown curly hair, blue gray eyes, tanned lookin', six foot tall, had a new red fox parka with a silver tail on the hood. It was you all right."

"Somebody forged that," declared Buck Goodson bitterly. "It's a lie an' a frame up. Some o' you boys is fixin' things so that me, a stranger in these heah parts, will git the blame for what yo' done yoreself——"

"Yaah!" drawled Sam McCallum, harshly. "That's so awful likely——"

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"Yo' say this heah prospector, Quartz Smith, was killed with a big 351 rifle, an' yo' found nothin' but a six-gun on me."

"Because you threw away the rifle, of course. You just as well lay off arguin' with us, fellow. You say you're from Texas, an' I s'pose you were run out of there as a killer—but up here you are nothin' but a chechako. You wouldn't be livin' now if it wasn't that McCallum here is a deputy marshal an' has got to handle you legal-like. I sure never will get over the way you done for my pardner, till I see you swing—you damn cowboy gunfighter!" And with a reddish savage gleam in his bluish green eyes, big Joe Grieg turned and stalked off into the kitchen, while Sam McCallum looked after him, respectfully.

OUTSIDE, the fierce winter gale whistled against the walls of Widow Creevers' shack. Stinging flurries of frozen snow obscured the panes of the small windows, and outside a string of wolf dogs still in harness shivered with annoyance as they lurked in the shelter of a lean-to, with their gray-furred backs hunched, waiting the return of the men who threatened young Buck Goodson with wild justice.

Within, the squalid two-room shake cabin reeked with alder wood smoke, which the wind drove down the rusty cookstove pipe.

"Make sure that badman is tied plenty good, Sam, and come for eat," the Aleut woman's clicking voice called from the stove. "The others will get all the gravy from the caribou meat if you no hurry."

"I fancy you're lashed fast enough," growled Sam McCallum, eyeing the stout binding on Buck Goodson's limbs which held him helplessly to the heavy rude bench upon which he had been thrown. However, being very short-sighted, McCallum bent quickly, ducking his head with an oddly swift gesture that was characteristic of him, and closely inspected the harness gear with his near-sighted eyes. He straightened up, evidently satisfied, but as an additional precaution turned to the flattish faced half-breed girl who was playing on the floor with a box of matches.

"Pita, if he moves, you yell, an' I'll give you half a dollar," he told her.

The brown skinned child nodded shrewdly. She fixed greedy little rat-black eyes on the prisoner. Buck Goodson shot her a glance of deep distaste. Then he called after the disappearing figure of Sam McCallum, "Wait."

McCallum, who had reached the kitchen, stopped and wheeled, with lowering brows. Quartz Smith, the dead prospector, had been one of McCallum's best friends, and he was bitter in his hatred of this young stranger from the States.

"What you want?"

"Don't I git nothin' to eat?" Buck Goodson queried coolly.

"Dogs eat when men are done, you gunman claim-jumper!" retorted McCallum. He strode into the kitchen, too hungry, like

the others of his party, to cavil at the smoke. Buck Goodson could not see either table or stove, but he could hear, loudly enough, the clatter of thick dishes, the clink of knives and forks as the men ate wolfishly while they assented to the vitriolic remarks of the Aleut woman, Creevers, anent the uncalled for murder of Quartz Smith.

IN THE squalidly dirty room occupied by the brown faced child and the captive there was silence, except for the snuffling of Pita, who had a cold but no handkerchief, and the occasional explosion of the matches she struck and let burn out.

Was he really going to be snuffed out by these men like one of those flaming matches in the breed girl's brown fingers, wondered the young Texan. He felt cold sweat exuding from his forehead, and he grew cold at the thought. The will to live had swelled in him until he writhed and strained at his bonds, noiselessly. He had led a decent life. Not an angelic life, but a decent one, in which he had seriously wronged no man. And now hardly a week on the Alaska Peninsula—he had disem-

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barked from the steamer *Skagway* at Seward—he had been set on by five parka-clad men, thrown on a sledge, and brought here on the way to what threatened to be his death for the murder of Quartz Smith, a man whom he had never seen or heard of.

The Aleut breed girl noticed his struggles. She screwed up her face at him in an impish leer, and struck another match. Its brief light threw into high visibility the greasy smears on her torn red calico dress, the gluttonous meanness of her flat-featured Mongol face. The match burned her finger, and she dropped it with an oath too adult in wickedness for her to understand. Yet in her precocity she seemed enormously old.

Presently she raised up and slid herself toward Buck Goodson, holding a flaming match in her fingers. An evil light glistened in her little jet black beady eyes as she held it close to his face. She tossed the match aside, shuffled herself to his shoulder and began to breathe in his ear, whispering so lightly that he had to listen hard.

"Got money, aah?"

He nodded quickly, lifting his head up as far as he could from the bench to which he was bound.

"Got more than half dollar?"

Swift nods.

"Pita take, an' burn you loose."

Buck Goodson nodded eagerly. Hope leaped violently within him. The little breed child might take his money and then fail to keep her bargain. But again she might live up to it, too. No telling. The money itself meant nothing to Buck Goodson just then. He spelled riches in one word—escape.

The dirty little brown fingers rifled his pocket clumsily but thoroughly. Her little jet black eyes glistened greedily over the loose silver, which she handled cautiously, without a single clink. In less than five minutes she had gone over him, rejecting all paper money, but taking every piece of silver, two pencils, his colored handkerchief, and his cheap nickel watch.

SHE buried the silver and the watch under a heap of worn out harness gear lying in a corner of the room, but stuffed the handkerchief and the pencils into her clothes. Then she moved away from the prisoner, picked up the match box, and stood striking matches noisily and throwing them down onto the rough black planks of the floor. Buck Goodson's heart fell. The black-hearted little liar!

The Aleut child shuffled a few steps across the floor, still striking matches, then she slid back over to Buck Goodson with a cunning Mongol grin. She had merely been throwing her acrimonious parent off guard. She set quickly to work with a capability born of her love of fire.

From the kitchen the noisy clatter of dishes, the shuffling walk of the Widow Creevers' skin clad feet, the hissing of a teakettle boiling over on the cookstove mingled in a ceaseless and unmusical combination of sounds as the men at the table ate with that singleness of purpose rising from keen hunger. The chase after Buck Goodson had been short, but his bringing in through the blizzardly wind and swirling snow had been arduous.

The Widow Creevers' clucking Aleut voice delivered a toneless guttural monologue on Pita, around whose axis the life of the woman seemed to revolve. Pita, indeed, was the only human creature of whom the Widow Creevers stood in awe. Daughter of herself and a white man, a fur pirate, since killed, who had once terrorized the Alaska Peninsula, Pita was a strange enough girl, and the oily faced Aleut woman was ruled by her. The child was said to have a weak heart and so must not be punished or denied. The Aleut woman's comment on her child's extreme intelligence and cunning were interspersed with guttural complaints against stovepipes down which the strong north wind blew soot and smoke.

Other smoke was rising from around Buck Goodson and mingling with that already in the shack, as the diligent and cunning Pita struck and applied burning matches to the harness gear with which he was bound. She set fire to one of his sleeves, but crushed the smoldering flame out. She burnt his wrists, bound behind him, so that he gritted his teeth from the pain. She did not seem to be accomplishing anything. The smell of the burning wool

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cloth of his shirt reduced Buck Goodson to angry despair. They would soon detect that odor in the kitchen.

Then the faint whisper of the Aleut child sounded in his ear again. "Pull! Pull plenty—*aah!*"

JERKING a pan of sizzling caribou meat off the smoking stove a few minutes later, the Widow Creevers switched back to the subject of her strange offspring. "Queer girl, my Pita," she repeated to the sourdoughs at the table. "She make dang'rous woman some day. I send her by-and-by to the mission at Dutch Harbor, for read and write and make plenty smart an' if she be pretty——"

The Widow Creevers had herself been educated in the Unalaska mission, which accounted for her ability to speak English, and expressive English at that. "She like her dead papa—terrible he was, and clever, strangled a wolf with his bare fists, and trapped a silver fox in Kotzee Pass so shy that no man could get it. Pita take snuff when five years old."

"You better break her of playin' with matches," growled one of the sourdoughs. "S'more coffee, please. She'll burn you out some day."

"Pita too smart, too smart for that," declared the Widow Creevers proudly. "I——" An unmistakable odor of burning woolen cloth got past the odor of fried caribou meat and stove smoke, mingling with the smell of coffee and sourdough bread. A chilly draft seemed to sweep through the shack as the wind whistled outside with renewed fury and hurled fluttering rifts of snowflakes against the black shake walls. The Aleut woman sniffed uneasily, aroused by the man's words. A large meat knife in her brown hand, she shuffled to the doorway opening into the other room.

There was no sign of the strange little Pita, that remarkable creature having hidden herself in an empty trunk. The prisoner was gone, a ring of burned matches surrounding the rude wooden bench to which he had been bound. The door by which he had left was ajar, but the outer calador was shut and prevented much indrive of the wind.

"Pita, my Pita!" screamed the Widow Creevers, frenziedly. "The chechako killer has taken my Pita!"

Five men sprang up as one. Five chairs were kicked aside. McCallum reached the doorway first. His angry roar filled the room. "The Siwash's infernal kid's burnt him loose! By Jeeves——"

HE SNATCHED up his drill parka and slipped into it swiftly, then dashed out to the lean-to for his dogs. To his rage and chagrin, he found they were gone. The sledge had been unlashed from its snub stake, the team straightened out and driven off into the blizzard. The nearly obliterated trail streaking off into the swirling snow haze told that much.

Two other teams, property of Joe Grieg and another sourdough, remained. They were not equal to the string of dogs that had been taken.

With angry shouts, Joe Grieg and Sam McCallum trailed the remaining animals into line, and then hastily started off into the storm. Before they had gone a thousand feet, however, the track of the fugitive vanished, blown clear out of sight by the northwest woollies sweeping down over the ragged peninsular mountains. The air was freezing, bitter cold.

BUCK GOODSON had come into this region because five years before his uncle, Jim Goodson, whom Buck remembered gratefully from boyhood, had settled on the Alaska Peninsula, and had sent Buck directions for reaching his claim. Jim Goodson had written that the claim was good and that he would make Buck a partner if he would come north—for Jim wasn't feeling good, and was finding life lonesome in the bleak wilderness of Kotzee Pass and Silver Valley.

So Buck Goodson, shaking the dust of his native Texas from his feet, had traveled by rail to Seattle, thence on the Admiral Line steamer, *Skagway,* to Seward;

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from there by powerboat to Chignik and Shuyak. He had no news from Jim Goodson for nearly a year. Little as the young Texan guessed it, his uncle was under the sod. The government commissioner at Shuyak had sold the claim at auction to Quartz Smith and Joe Grieg, the highest bidders, to protect the property from claim-jumpers. His letter with the news and the bank draft for the money probably crossed trails with Buck Goodson as he traveled north.

At Shuyak, without a word to anyone, and with characteristic self reliance, Buck Goodson had bought a dog-team of his own and set off without a guide straight over the trail to Silver Valley and Kotzee Pass, seventy miles to the westward. He went by the directions of an Aleut breed, and the detailed written instructions of his uncle. In the mouth of the rocky valley he had been set upon by these parka clad sourdoughs and accused of the murder of Quartz Smith. He had never seen the murdered man, while his principal accuser, Joe Grieg, was equally a stranger to him.

Now, with the borrowed dog team, the Texan plunged up the Silver Valley trail, resolved to find his relative, who he felt would be competent to extricate him from this strange tangle. He had the approach to Kotzee Pass as his unfailing guide, with its chaos of broken peaks and white mantled slopes, combined with his own considerable ability for orientating himself.

Ravenously hungry, since he had eaten only once after leaving Shuyak, but savagely exultant at his escape from his captors, he urged the line of gray furred wolf dogs to their best gait over the icy hard trail.

Around him the blizzard stiffened, whipping his charred garments against his body, freezing him through with a biting chill, congealing the blood in his veins, striking him with the bitter intensity with which only the cold of Alaskan winter can strike. But he felt that the cruel ferocity of the woollies sweeping down from the peninsular mountains was mildness compared to the natures of the men from whom he had escaped.

PROGRESS along the trail speedily became difficult, for the fugitive came upon chasms which he had to avoid, he crossed slippery slopes where the storm had bared the hard crust and which the pads of the dogs could not grip. He and his animals were numbed, blinded, choked by the rage of the blizzard; his face grew stiff and his lungs felt frozen.

In an hour he struck the ragged boulder-strewn wilderness of Kotzee Pass, where the black rocks stood like grim sentinels in the snow fog, and made driving still more hazardous. But Buck Goodson judged, and judged correctly that the freezing woollies howling through the pass would hide his trail and sting to blurriness the eyesight of the manhunters behind him.

When he came at last upon a little black shake cabin right on the trail, he recognized it instantly as that of his uncle, for it was exactly like a neat pencil sketch that Jim Goodson had sent him three years before. It was built in a sheltered spot close to a snow-streaked black precipice overtopping the pass. Farther along, on a steep white slope stood the rude windlass of the shaft in which Jim Goodson had been working.

Behind the cabin was the usual lean-to for a string of dogs, but no dogs were there now. The place looked abandoned in the snow haze and deepening gloom of the Alaskan winter afternoon. But from the crooked kitchen stovepipe whirled a few wisps of blue smoke, as if from a dying fire.

Buck Goodson hid his team of dogs cautiously a short distance from the cabin, in the shelter of a windbreak afforded by the broken black masses of rock fringing the trail. Then he struggled forward against the wind to the shack. One crime, he thought grimly, he had really committed. He had stolen that dog-team.

The door of the cabin was not locked. He stepped inside, and found himself in an amazingly neat little room. The bare-

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ness of the shake walls was relieved by a few framed pictures, on the rude table was an embroidered doily. The room appeared to have been reduced from its original size by a partition with a curtained doorway revealing a tiny sleeping room still more cozy and neat than the one in which Buck Goodson stood. In another direction a second doorway opened into a sort of pantry and storeroom.

The Texan strode eagerly into the storeroom, where he found shelves of canned fruit and boxes of dried fruit, and a white tin breadbox containing biscuits and two loaves of fresh crusty bread of a sort not ordinarily found in Alaskan cabins—though Buck Goodson was too new in the country to know that. He could hardly wait, ravenous as he was, to open a glass jar of red raspberries and cut thick slices of bread to spread with the rich syrupy preserve. He ate with sheer delight, standing by the storeroom table. He spied a piece of cold fried caribou meat and added that to his feast. For the moment, in his healthy hunger, he forgot that he was hunted, forgot his disappointment over seeing no firearms here, no weapons better than the bread knife with which he was demolishing the big loaf.

A MELLOW whistle and a sound of dogs close outside the cabin startled him into renewed caution. Then a light step sounded coming across the threshold of the outer door, audible above the soughing of the wind.

He had closed the storeroom door, and now he noted a knot hole in it near the top. The hand-riven and hand-sawed lumber had been precious and the worst of it had been respectfully used. He peered through the knot hole, his right hand clenched on the knife. He wondered excitedly who could be whistling like that. It was a boyish sound, not likely to be old Jim Goodson. Jim didn't whistle, he remembered.

A young girl came into the line of his vision. She was in sledge clothes, red fox parka and sealskin boots. Her breath steamed from her dainty nostrils, her mink furred hood was rimmed with frost, framing an entirely lovely face. She slipped out of the parka and flung it on the table. Then, with a low silvery-toned exclamation, she stooped to seize and fondle a fat gray little wolf dog puppy that suddenly appeared from behind the stove, whining pitifully.

"Poor little Wolf Jack!" cried the girl, rubbing its nose. "Jess an orphan, he is, with his mother shot by that big brute of a Joe Grieg because she snapped at him." With squeals and cries, half a dozen little brothers and sisters of Wolf Jack appeared, sticking triangular shaped gray heads out from around the stove. They came nuzzling her hands while she played with them, laughing softly, and a little bitterly. "Fine big ruffian, that Joe Grieg! Bet you, I'm glad I found him out in time. Glad dad's got a roll of money, now, so I won't have to——"

Through his knothole, Buck Goodson, cowboy from Texas, stared uneasily, studying this amazingly pretty girl. He was sure that his uncle Jim had not been married—had no children. If he had, they would be less than twelve years of age. This girl was a woman grown. What was she doing here? Had Jim been keeping something from him——

Boots stamped outside. The girl raised swiftly from among the brood of little huskies. Her small right hand flicked to the thirty-eight swinging in her holster. Buck Goodson had been eyeing the gun enviously.

Then as a man flung open the outer door and strode in, she withdrew her hand and laughed. "Why, dad! I never heard your dogs——"

"No, and you wouldn't, the way this wind's howling and woollying down Kotzee," he panted, pulling off his ice glinting parka and mittens, and slapping his fingers. "I'm sure feeling disgruntled, Marge. We got that devil of a chechako gunman that shot Quartz Smith, and while we were eating at the Widow Creevers,

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that little hellish breed rat of hers burns him loose. He made a getaway—with my team, too. The boys are going to start mushing along through the pass looking for him soon as this weather lets up—they'll get him sooner or later. Going to send word to the marshal at Unga to look out for any strangers coming off the mainland in boats."

As he spoke, he was shedding his red fox coat. From the peephole in the storeroom door, Buck Goodson watched him anxiously and clutched tighter the bread knife in his hand as he stared at the two big Colts tied down on Sam McCallum's thighs.

THE girl was a McCallum. This was evidently McCallum's shack, not Jim Goodson's. Buck Goodson saw now that he had stumbled into the very heart of the nest of savage sourdoughs who had set upon him.

"I'll get you a bite ready, dad," said the girl, moving toward the storeroom.

"No need of that. Joe and I ate at the Widow Creevers, I just told you. And also Mink Winterman." He smiled grimly. "You can't keep the Mink away from Joe, you know."

"Joe—why, is he here?"

"Present!" a richly musical voice exclaimed, as Joe Grieg's tall well carried figure strode in. "Just stopped to look up the pass, where I thought I saw a dog move. Guess not, in this weather."

Joe Grieg was handsome, in a big blond way.

But the girl's trim shoulders had stiffened instantly at his unexpected entrance. She nodded coldly, at which Grieg looked genuinely astonished and hurt. She turned straight to her father.

"That man you've been after, dad. How did you know he killed poor Quartz Smith?"

Her father turned from hanging up his parka.

"Joe came on Quartz Smith after he was cold. In his dead hand was a piece of envelope with a description scrawled across it. Smith must of barely had strength to write that. Said the man was a stranger, an' a bad one. You could hardly read the words, but we did make 'em out. And Joe had seen the stranger mushing up toward Kotzee the day before——"

"But we didn't come to talk about such disagreeable things, Margie," said Joe Grieg, drawing closer to the girl and towering over her in his powerful strength, his blue green eyes flashing hungrily. "I came over with your dad to tell you that the commissioner from Unga who has authority to perform marriage ceremonies is going to be in Shuyak Monday. And I'm wondering if you won't keep your promise and hurry along the day we were to be married. Why not go to Shuyak with me——?"

Buck Goodson wondered if he had not been a fool, a green fool, as he watched and listened, for failing to spring out and rush the girl while she was playing with the squeaking pups, and trying to get her gun. She would have had him at a serious disadvantage in her young alertness if she had heard his approach. This competent daughter of sturdy old Sam McCallum might readily have shot down any stranger trying to seize her. There'd have been no time for explaining that he merely needed her thirty-eight and not her flashingly lovely auburn-haired self.

BECAUSE of his delay, he would now have these men as well as the girl to deal with, unless luck kept them out of the storeroom until he had a chance to get away. There was a small window in the storeroom, but it was immovably built into the wall of the cabin. The panes in it were so small that he would have to smash the sash in order to make an opening large enough to escape through. That would make a tremendous noise. The people in the next room could not fail to hear it. For the same reason he dared not try to bar the door. Any sound would alarm them. And, like Sam McCallum, Joe Grieg was armed with heavy six-guns.

Through the knot hole, Buck Goodson now saw still another man slouch

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into the room. This was Max Winterman, whom some called by his appellation "Mink," and others, "Joe Grieg's shadow" —a pale bleary-eyed little fellow, peaked faced and thin, and shrinking in his overwhelming knowledge of his own inferiority. The others hardly noticed him, nor did he seem to expect notice as he slipped silently over toward the stove. He carried a gun, only one, but Buck Goodson thought grimly to himself that the odds against him were already so great that it would make little difference if this sneaky looking newcomer toted half a dozen guns.

The young Texan cursed himself for giving way to his hunger, though he had needed food badly enough. Searching the cabin for weapons would have been better. But now he wished with intense regret that he had snatched up food and mushed on—not knowing that if he had done so, he would assuredly have perished upon emerging from the north end of Kotzee Pass where the blizzard howled with terrific violence, sweeping up over the peninsular ranges from the heaving gray wilderness of the Bering Sea. Once there, where would he have gone?

Marge McCallum was standing mute and with tightly pressed red lips, silently resisting Joe Grieg's urging. He stepped close to her and caught at her hand. She jerked it away, sharply.

Grieg's big well featured face hardened, his lips swelled slightly, and his eyes gleamed under his wrinkling brows. Then he hurriedly smoothed out his expression and said with smiling tenderness, gazing down into the lifted beauty of the girl's wrathful blue eyes.

"I—of course you'll keep your word."

She was still silent. Sam McCallum looked at her, peering quickly into her face with his peculiar rapid jerk that he had acquired because of his nearsightedness, and then said slowly, "Answer him, Marge. Tell him whether you want to marry him."

"She does want to! And she will—you know it!" burst out Grieg vehemently.

"I can't," stormily cried the girl. "I did think I liked you, Joe—especially when you helped out dad. I liked you till the day you shot that malamute for snapping at you when you kicked her pups. Little Wolf Jack's mother you killed—you didn't think I knew it, but I did. If I'd been there you'd have been soft and polite and saying nice things—the nice things you keep on your tongue but not in your heart."

Grieg flushed a sullen red, and raised his heavy hands, as if to clinch them, then recovered himself.

"Marge, I was drinking that day. I never meant to shoot that malamute——"

"You lie!" she broke in fiercely. "You were sober as you are now. And since then I've heard other things about you. That girl Russian Mary at Shuyak—just a silly kid! Oh, you are——"

She turned and ran suddenly—ran into the storeroom where Buck Goodson stood, and swiftly barred the door from the inside. For a moment she stood with heaving breast and misting eyes, as though grieving over the feeling of affection which the knowledge of Joe Grieg's brutality had killed in her. Then she saw Buck Goodson.

HE LAID an imploring finger on his lips. He knew that the character of a fugitive was plainly branded on him. He was coatless, capless. On his left shoulder his woolen shirt was torn from his struggles with his captors. His sleeves were scorched and fire charred. His burnt and blistered wrists demonstrated precisely how he had been freed from his prisoning bonds. He said to himself despairingly that he looked a fright of a sight.

What he didn't know was that the girl's swift intuition saw clean candor and resolute courage in his well molded face. Self control was there as well as an agonized appeal for mercy.

She drew a deep breath and stood as silent as he. Then, with an unexpected and lovely swiftness, she smiled at him. He answered with a boyish grin. Youth in distress had called to youth, and youth had answered.

She pointed to a cookbook on the shelf with its open page and some paper on which was a recipe for gingerbread. Beside it hung a pencil on a string. Buck Goodson understood. Noiselessly he moved to the shelf, seized the pencil and wrote briefly the plight in which he stood, hiding nothing.

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As he wrote, she moved to his side and watched the hurried words form under his fingers. And at the same time she could hear the complaints and incriminations of Grieg to her father. His voice had lost its rich ring and had grown harsh and sinister. She shuddered. It had been all false, that trained music, those gentle tones.

Joe Grieg had indeed turned pale with fury. He now strode toward the door, a hoarse growl in his throat, and he snatched at the handle as though he were going to tear it open. Roughly he called to her. There was no answer. Then Sam McCallum stopped this with a curt, "Wait!"

Grieg wheeled upon him. "Wait for what? I aim to be treated square. You promised me she would marry me if I let you off payin'. You've done considerable braggin' that you always kept your word."

"I promised you that either she should marry you or that I'd settle in full before the first of the year. And tomorrow's the first of the year——"

"You ain't got the money—you ain't got a hundred dollars."

"I owe you two thousand for the supplies and gear you've bought for me in the Shuyak trading store. I've got twenty thousand dollars under my bunk there."

Joe Grieg's mouth quickly fell open. But he looked incredulous and suspicious. So did his cringing shadow, the Mink.

"How could you, busted like you are?"

"Busted like I am, eh!" bitterly. "Thought you owned me and my girl, eh, Joe Grieg? Well, I'll tell you. This old claim I bought from Jim Goodson has turned out a hundred per cent, just like the one you an' Quartz Smith bought from him down below in the valley. I sold it for twenty thousand cash yesterday to Kim Jordon, buyer for the Alaska Three Metals Company."

JOE GRIEG made an odd sound in his throat. The Mink fastened a keen fascinated eye on the old man, who continued curtly to Grieg. "I'd have given you the money anyway, even if my girl had married you. But I'm goin' to settle with you here an' now. You get your two thousand, plus interest in full. I get a receipt."

Marge McCallum had usurped Buck Goodson's knot hole and was peering keenly through it. But he had discovered a bad joint in the rude wall between the rooms where the planks, used too green, had shrunk. Here he had even a better view through the slit than from the knot hole. Both watched Sam McCallum as he strode to the rude bunk spiked against the farther wall. It was covered with a bright red checkered blanket. After the miner moved Grieg and the Mink.

McCallum reached down under his bunk, pulled out an iron box, unlocked it and took out a thick roll of yellow banknotes with a rubber snap around the bundle. Mine buyers in Alaska pay cash, for there may be no bank within a thousand miles.

The miner went to the table, drew up a rude chair, sat down, and began shuffling off one hundred dollar bills.

As he thumbed the money, the little pup, Wolf Jack came whining from under the table, and snapped viciously at the ankles of Grieg, as though even his tiny brain recognized a hateful enemy who had wronged him. The breathing of Grieg and the Mink had become inaudible—Grieg's hand was at his hip. The room was growing shadowy and half dark.

Suddenly one of Grieg's heavy six-guns crashed out in the gloom, spurting a deadly tongue of hot red flame. Almost simultaneously with the roar of the weapon, McCallum's head jerked forward. His right hand full of bills shot out along the surface of the table, the fingers closing convulsively. His breast lunged against the table edge. His mouth rounded in a dull gasping sound, his hand fell forward on the scattered banknotes. From among his thick gray-streaked reddish hair a stream redder than raspberries began to run profusely. A blue wisp of smoke floated up in the room.

Marge started back from the knot hole

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and stared with piteous wide eyes at Buck Goodson as though unable to believe what she had just seen and heard.

As the gun's report had soared through the wall of the storeroom, Buck Goodson had whirled from his post of observation. Almost without a sound he sprang to Marge McCallum's side, caught her in his arms and whispered, "They've killed him. I'm going out there."

While he spoke he caught her weapon, let go of her, made sure the gun was loaded, and softly unbarred the door. The girl stood movelessly. Then Buck Goodson jerked open the door and sprang out through it, his left fist doubled up, the thirty-eight in his right.

THE record of Joe Grieg's evil life along the Alaska Peninsula had been a train of quick decisions.

The moment that twenty thousand dollars lay on the table in front of Sam McCallum, his plans were complete. With the help of his cowardly but sometimes useful shadow, the Mink, he could get the money, and fasten a new crime on the back of that unknown young chechako who had escaped from the Widow Creevers' shack. The girl he would take with him and dispose of her for good—after he was through with her.

When Grieg's right hand went to his gun behind the unfortunate miner's back, his left made a comprehensive signal to the Mink. That individual, as quick as he was sneaking, understood perfectly. He darted along the wall and crouched by the door, ready to spring on Marge as she ran out, as she was sure to do at the sound of the shot.

When not Marge McCallum but the fugitive they had let escape sprang out, the

Mink's mind was full of assurance that only a girl would appear. The radius of the fading evening light left the storeroom door deeply shadowed by a tall set of shelves. The Mink flung himself on the issuing figure in the murky dusk.

A wicked jolt on the jaw from Buck Goodson's well practiced left knocked the Mink down—and out. In the same moment, the young Texan fired.

Certain that his comrade would capture and disarm the girl, Grieg, his smoke curling six-gun in his hand, was bending over the slumped figure of Sam McCallum. He must make sure. When he left the house only a wordless dead man must remain. He was in the act of coolly lifting up McCallum's head by the thick reddish hair, to see if any life were left in the miner's body, when he suddenly wheeled as he heard the Mink gasp and fall. Too late he saw the dark shape of the young stranger with his leveled gun. His own weapon came up, then he felt a hot searing blast rip through his collar bone, saw a frightful blinding flash of fire in his brain, and crumpled across his victim's shoulders, rolled off them into the space between the body and the chair back. Then he lay there, his head striking the floor on one side of the chair, his mukluk clad feet on the other. Blood streamed from his neck and from his temples. He was shot through the brain.

Buck Goodson lifted Sam McCallum from the chair. He found Marge beside him, trying to help. Her face was deathly white, but her hands were firm and steady. She moaned piteously, "Oh, maybe he isn't dead!"

"That killer couldn't miss at sech close range!" muttered Buck Goodson. "But he has, I think!" he gasped, staring at the bleeding head of the miner. "Look heah! The scalp's plowed, but it's only a furrow. Didn't yo' see how yore pa bent his haid over his money jest as that gunman drew an' fired? He may come through."

BUCK GOODSON lifted up the miner and carried him across the room to his bunk, where Marge hovered over him, anxiously trying to stanch her father's scalp wound with a wet towel.

The young Texan buckled Joe Grieg's gunbelt around his waist, with a thrill of satisfaction, and turned to the Mink, who was beginning to move and groan. At that

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instant there came from outside a snarling of dogs and scrunch of sledges.

Marge McCallum raised her head and motioned frantically toward the storeroom door. Buck Goodson shook his head, smiling grimly, both of Joe Grieg's guns out.

Outside a voice called sonorously "Marge!"

Dory Stevens's tones. Stevens was one of her numerous suitors. She slipped out into the calador. She faced some ten or twelve men in parkas, breathing steamily.

"Marge, is there a stranger here?"

"He—he was here."

"Gone?"

"I—I'm afraid so."

"Which way? Where?"

"I don't know."

As she spoke with evident reluctance she saw Dory Stevens staring keenly at her. Did these sourdoughs guess the fugitive was still there? If they rushed the house what would it gain Buck Goodson that he had saved herself and perhaps her father? The blood of the dead Smith demanded swift justice. These men might disbelieve her story of the rescue. To her added terror, she heard voices within. The Mink was talking, was begging, promising something.

DORY STEVENS started. "Marge, you're foolin' us. We're goin' in!"

The sourdoughs started forward, guns in their hands, their faces hard in the murky light of the dying Alaskan day. At that moment, from behind Marge McCallum, their man stepped out, driving before him the terrified Mink.

"Speak yore little piece to these heah sourdough men—an' speak it damned quick!" snapped Buck Goodson.

The Mink lifted up a wabbly and anguished voice. "I ain't bad by natur', gents, I been led astray——"

The gun muzzle jammed his spine harder. "Never mind that slush. This ain't no salvation meetin'!"

"But they gotta understand that!" howled the Mink. "They might drill me quick as I told the truth. Gents, don't be rash. It's an orful thing to kill an innercent man. I seen him do it, but had no hand! Not in that, ner not in this one, neither——"

Buck Goodson's voice cut in. "Who killed Quartz Smith?"

"Grieg! Grieg! He downed him! He did! Last summer he done fer old Jim Goodson, so's to buy in his claim. He took Quartz fer pardner, 'cause he was too lazy to work it up himself. Then day before yesterday when a mine buyer paid him an' Quartz fifteen thousand fer the claim in cold cash, he downed Quartz to git all the money! I never had no hand in it. I told him killin' a man on Friday was a hell of a note!"

THE sourdoughs had listened in rigid silence. Only a dog snarled out in the shadows, his short ears showing sharp and pointed in the gathering dusk.

Dory Stevens spoke up then. "This Grieg had better be got real quick——"

"He's done got!" blubbered the Mink. "This chechako fellow was hidin' in this cabin, an' when Grieg downed Marge's pap——"

"What!" gasped Dory Stevens.

"This feller got Grieg, an' knocked hell out o' me. I knowed that killin' Smith on Friday would bring bad luck. Go in an' see, gents. But please remember, I been nothin' worse'n led astray. Nothin' worse——"

Buck Goodson led him away from the door. "Yo'-all can come in, now," he said steadily to the sourdoughs.

Dory Stevens stared at the speaker with largely opened eyes. "An' this Grieg picked on you fer a chechako, to frame you with this killin'!"

"Yore 'pologies are accepted," said Buck Goodson grimly.

"Chechako, they called you!" muttered Dory Stevens. "Joe Grieg made a bad mistake, not knowin' there's some men who never was an' never will be chechako, though they been in Alaska only a day."

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PLUMB TENDER

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

Author of "The Gun Fighters," "The Painted Stallion," etc.

A NEW-HATCHED GUNSLINGER RAISES ENOUGH RUMPUS TO LAST UNTIL THE CRACK OF DOOM; MAYBE BECAUSE IT WAS SAID OF HIM THAT IF HE SAW THE HINGES OF HELL HE'D HAVE TO SWING ON THE GATE OUT OF CURIOSITY. BUT THE WHOLE HAIR-TRIGGER JAMARILLO RANGE COUNTRY WAS TO BE IN ON THE CLIMAX

CHAPTER I

FUGITIVE COWBOYS

EVENING shadows were playing hide and seek among the towering cliffs of the Jamarillo range when two horsemen rode swiftly down the Wild Cat trail. Coming at a gallop out of a broad fissure walled in by masses of red sandstone, hats pulled low, squinting beneath the brim in every direction as if fearful of pursuit, the two men seemed in desperate haste to reach the shelter of Arroyo Norte. Big revolvers slung low in girded holsters on the thighs of both fugitives and rifles resting across their saddles in front of them heightened the desperado touch.

The man in the lead, a little old wizened-up, gray-bearded desert rat, seamed, battered and grizzled and dressed in nondescript cowboy clothes, rode a nigger-heeled gray, swaying and yielding to the jarring plunging of his mustang over rough ground as if glued to the saddle. A brown fluid trickled out of the corner of his mouth and made a mark through the bristle on his chin. His jug-shaped head was thrust slightly forward as he allowed his small, round, black eyes to dart here and there, taking in every detail of trail, rocks, bush and sky.

The second rider was a tall young man who showed heaps of daylight between seat and saddle and whose fagged mustang gave evidence of having been beefsteaked aplenty.

The horse was a game little clay-bank bearing the Anchor C brand, vented, and it did not belong to the rider. In fact young Hodcomb Farlin, better known as "Hod" or "Doc," had borrowed the animal without the owner's consent.

In the shadow of the massive, silent mountain the horsemen appeared like dwarfs. The magical light of early evening made apparitions of them. The red towering walls threw back the echo of their horses's hoofs with resonant, musical vibrations. A flaming orange disk, sinking over the Western crest of the Jamarillos, lingered long enough, like a fiery, malignant eye, to point out their trail to their pursuers.

The little old man, with a backward glance up the trail, swept into the thicket of matted palo verde, greasewood and prickly pear at the entrance to Arroyo Norte, dropped from the saddle and, with rifle ready, stepped to a position where he

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could watch the road without being seen. Hod Farlin dismounted gingerly, rubbing his stiffened limbs and stretching stiffly. He removed his hat to mop his inflamed, perspiring brow, revealing a stiff brush of red hair, high forehead, the broad brow and intellectual features of a student, a dirt-streaked face covered with a three-day bristle of beard, and blue eyes, swollen almost shut from alkali dust. Quite obviously he had not stood the long ride as well as the older man.

HARDLY had they disappeared into the bosque when a pursuing rider topped the rise over which they had just come. At intervals after him came another and still a third.

"Watch 'em fog along, Doc," muttered the old buckaroo. "It's them, shore as my name's Tom Pry."

"I can't understand why they keep after me so ruthlessly," said Hod Farlin, dabbing at his burning eyes with a handkerchief.

"Put hobbles on the chin music," warned old Pry. "For a new-hatched gunslinger you've raised enough damnation to last till the crack of doom. Sing low."

"If they keep this up, they'll get me sore again," continued Hod in a lower voice. "I've done no one any harm. In fact since I came to the San Madrone range country I've tried to do nothing but good and what has come of it? I've been shot at from ambush, framed up on, arrested and now driven from my home and office as a fugitive. Was ever an innocent man placed in such a predicament? What have I done? Tell me that?"

Old Man Pry gave voice to a senile, noiseless chuckle.

"Ain't I tried to tell you time and again! Yo're tender. Plumb tender!"

"Tender!" retorted Hod bitterly. "How can a piece of human flesh that's been smoked under this broiling sun for five months be tender? I've learned to shoot, haven't I? I can fork a bucking horse. And I stood up against the worst gunman in Wild Cat. Yet you insist that I'm a tenderfoot. Why?"

Old Tom Pry peered off up the trail at the pursuing horsemen for several seconds before replying. The sun was setting in a blaze of glory, but there was still enough light to distinguish details.

"It's this here buttinsky streak in yeh, Doc," said Pry abruptly. "If you seen the hinges of hell you'd have to swing on the gate out o' curiosity. Fust time I met you I warned yeh, 'This yere's a hair-trigger country. Don't butt into other folks affairs.' 'Member that? Lot of good it done. I mought as well chawed up them words and swallered 'em. Besides, you got too much language stored up in yore system. Pears sometimes to be just oozin' out of yore skin. Langwidge is like steam. It's dangerous under high pressure less'n you got a safety valve. You ain't. Words keep fermentin' inside yore carcass. At the minute silence is most golden, you sizzle, puff up in the middle and out pops a burst of grammar like a skunk from his hole."

Hod Farlin, his eyes on the leading pursuer, made a wry face and straightened up suddenly to punch a crick out of his back.

"The point is, I never done those men any real harm," he said.

"Mebby you ain't no liar," snorted Pry, "but yo're darned economical of the truth." A long skinny finger indicated the foremost of the trio, a very tall, slim cowboy, whose protruding buck teeth gave him the appearance of perpetually smiling. Pry had said of him that his skin was so tight that when he shut his eyes his mouth flew open; and vice versa. "Know him?"

"Skinner Roslin, but——"

"But, yore billy goat," interrupted Old Pry. "Course he ain't got no reason to be mad at you. You never stuck a gun in his belly and called him a crook and locked him up in the Wild Cat jail, did yeh?"

Hod Farlin started to light a cigarette. Old Pry knocked it out of his hand. "Here comes the deputy," he warned. "He could ketch the odor of a sulphur match mighty quick in this clear dry air. Sit tight. I think Skinner is goin' to pass us by."

SKINNER halted not a hundred feet from where the fugitives hid, fixed his eyes upon the canyon mouth and then

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glanced back at McArdle, the deputy sheriff. Skinner had been in the saddle all day, riding hard, and some of his venom against Hod Farlin had oozed away. He was thinking now of reaching Jamarillo town more than of the man hunt. Visions of beefsteak and bright saloon lights replaced dreams of vengeance. When the deputy gave him no sign, he continued on.

The second rider, a big, paunchy man, was in plain view now. This was Deputy Sheriff McArdle.

"And, oh, how McArdle should love you!" pursued Old Pry. "You never done nothin' to him, either; only took away his iron and resisted arrest and throwed him into one of his own cells. How could that feller be so touchy as to take offense at a little thing like that?"

"I'm a friend of McArdle," protested Hod. "I——"

Old Tom Pry choked on his own mirth. "If that's the way you treat yore friends, what do you do to a enemy? Here comes Pete Callen. Reckon the way you soaked him, you two must be just plain Dammin and Pithy-yes."

Hod relapsed into sullen silence. Pry had been riding him mercilessly since they had been forced to flee from Wild Cat. It seemed he could do nothing right. At the beginning of the flight he had considered himself a fair plainsman. When they camped for the first day, he began to think he knew nothing at all about woodcraft and trail lore. As the third rider became distinguishable Hod gripped his rifle a little tighter and his face burned. The rear guard was a big-bodied, black-bearded cattleman astride a large roan. A white bandage around his head showed under flopping hat brim.

"This friend of yourn is wearin' yore brand," gloated Pry, indicating the bandage. "Now he would shore be an ungrateful cuss if he's mad at you, Doc. All you done was to butt in on his cattle deal with the Rico ranch, steal this clay bank of hisn, kill one of his men, throw him in jail with the others and bust his head open with yore gun barrel."

Pry ceased speaking and became alert, rifle thrust out before him. Callen, the black-beard, pulled his horse to a halt in a swirl of dust.

"We better look in the wash," he bawled, his voice harsh and commanding. "Mebby them fellers entered Arroyo Norte."

McArdle stopped and swung around. He did not appear very anxious for the task.

"Too dark to do anything now," he objected. "I don't hanker bustin' in there against Tom Pry and him pertected by the shadders and rocks. Better we git into Jamarillo and raise a bigger posse."

Hod Farlin waited tensely for Pete Callen's answer. The black-beard was coming straight toward them, revolver drawn, eyes searching the rocky soil for trail sign. Cattle had passed this way and made it almost impossible to distinguish recent tracks. He came so close that Hod could see the glint in his green-tinted eyes and hear the sobbing breath of his jaded bronco. If Callen decided to penetrate the thicket there would be more fighting. Even if they held him up or shot him down, they would still be in great danger. Jamarillo was so close that people in the town would hear the firing, a posse would form and escape would be cut off. Hod did not want any more fighting for the day. He craved a hot cup of coffee, food to fill his collapsing stomach and easement for his tired and aching limbs.

The claybank mustang moved. The creaking of saddle leather sounded loud enough to be heard to town in the ears of Hod Farlin. Pete Callen did not detect it because at that moment he turned and was yelling at the others.

"We better take a look-see here," he opined. "If it was me on the run, I think I'd pick this place to duck into."

He rode back toward them. An argument ensued. Skinner Roslin and McArdle did not want to comb the arroyo. "If yo're

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so frisky, hop to it," said McArdle at last. "Me, I'm goin' to git outside of some chow."

Deserted by Skinner and the deputy, Pete Callen yielded, but not without considerable profanity. The fugitives waited until the diminishing hoofbeats told them the pursuers had gone; then emerged onto the trail and mounted. The lights of Jamarillo appeared faintly yellow in the middle distance. Night came with the suddenness of a desert sunset. A faint breeze sprang up, cooling fevered brows. Nocturnal birds flitted by on whispering wing. An owl called from a rocky ledge and was answered by the distant wail of a coyote.

HOD FARLIN secured his coat from the bundle he carried back of the cantle and put it on. He was shivering from the cold. Pry did not seem to mind it.

"Let's figger a mite," suggested Tom Pry. "We're in a sky-limit game and if we don't step along pretty spry, mebby we'll come to, usin' wings to climb them golden stairs."

"Perhaps I'd better get hold of Callen and explain," suggested Hod. "No use of being hounded around like this over nothing. If I've made a mistake, of course I'll try to straighten it out."

Old Tom Pry showed his snag teeth in an aggravating grin.

"Now that's me all over," he said gravely. "Whenever I kills the wrong man, I allus apologize."

"Oh, shut up, you damned little runt! I'm tired of your sarcasm. If I wasn't with you, the mosquitoes would carry you off."

"Not any," came back the old buckaroo. "I'm so little the meskitters couldn't find me. But let me tell you something, you long eared yearlin'! If I take you to Jamarillo I'm goin' to ride close-herd on yeh and if you start yippin' out of turn, I'll disown yeh and turn yeh over to the Association as a stray. Jamarillo's loaded with dynamite for you and me."

Hod suggested that they pass up Jamarillo and go on to the next town. Pry pointed out that the next town was seventy miles away and that they could never make it on their fagged horses. Besides it would carry them beyond the wild horse country where the two men planned to hunt mustangs during their enforced isolation. It was decided that they would enter Jamarillo unobtrusively, get something to eat, buy another horse for Hod so he could turn the stolen claybank loose and purchase ammunition and supplies. Then they would immediately head back into the San Madrones and spend the next few weeks hunting mustangs until the hue and cry had died down or Hod Farlin's letters brought enough information to enable them to fight Pete Callen's gang in the open.

Keeping under cover, the two men followed the arroyo to the outskirts of Jamarillo. Here they entered deep into the thicket, unsaddled their mustangs, let them have a good roll, staked the horses out to graze where the dried grass was thick, spread wet saddle blankets out on bushes to dry and hid their plunder.

As Hod Farlin stalked along behind Pry his hand rested on the butt of his six-shooter and every nerve was on edge.

CHAPTER II

THE LOST LADY

THE tenderfoot forgot all aches and pains. Thorns tore at his hands and clothes unnoticed. Just ahead of him loomed the black outlines of Jamarillo houses, many of them dark at this hour. Off to the left, numerous scattered tents showed white in the chaparral, and the fugitives passed several campers' wagons before they reached the outskirts of the cowtown.

"Hi there! Who's that?"

A bearded wagoner stood in their path, right thumb hooked in his belt just above the black stock of a six-shooter.

Hod Farlin felt the hot blood surge through him as he swung his rifle around so that it pointed toward the mule skinner. Since coming to this wild western country a few months before he had suffered several baptisms of gunfire and the thought of bullets no longer paralyzed him. To his surprise he saw that Old Tom Pry

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made no move toward his revolver, though the aged buckaroo was lightning swift on the draw.

"Hi ya, partner," returned Pry. "You lost somebody?"

The mule skinner relaxed at the sound of the voice. He came nearer and, sizing up Pry instantly as a desert rat, waxed friendly.

"You ain't the man I thought," he apologized. "This town is shore on the boom. Ever' place you turn they's a stranger. Reckon' you ain't no stranger."

Pry gravely bit off an ample chew of plug and stowed it away in his cheek before replying.

"No, partner," he admitted. "I ain't no stranger. But all this hullerballoo sence the railroad came is new to me. Last time I was in Jamarillo things was purty quiet.'' The sound of pistol shots from the direction of uptown interrupted him. It was followed by loud yells, a woman's scream and then the staccato beat of horses' hoofs. "But it ain't quiet no more," Pry concluded.

Pry stared ahead. The mule skinner stopped him with a motion of his hand.

"Wait a minute, old-timer," he requested. "I'm lookin' for a party. This party was last heerd of in the San Madrone country, which as I take it includes Wild Cat and Jamarillo. It's a gal."

The mule skinner ceased speaking and pulled hard on his cigarette. After the outburst of yelling and shooting, the sound of uptown hilarity had died to an undertone above which rose now and then the wail of a violin and the thrill of a woman's voice in song. All about them in the sage and cactus, campfires began to flame brightly, mysteriously. To their nostrils came the aroma of burning wood, the appetizing smell of coffee and the odor of bacon frying in the pan.

"A gal," repeated the mule skinner in a husky voice. "My daughter."

Old Pry's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Hod crowded closer and scrutinized the wagoner with renewed interest. He was a heavyset, short, gray-bearded man, well dressed according to range standards, wearing on his vest the Western emblem of stability, a massive gold watch chain.

WITH the ice broken the wagoner quickly told the tale. His wife had died. His daughter had become dissatisfied with the quiet life of Quartz City where he had worked as skinner on an ore wagon and had run away with a gambler. Since that day John Sanborn had been searching far and wide for her. Her name was Jessie Sanborn and she was tall and very blond and, according to her father, "purty as a pitcher."

"Then there's this feller that coaxed her to run off," continued Sanborn in a different tone. "He went under the moniker of Travers at Quartz City. He was an albino, white-haired, white-faced, kind of slim and ladylike but he had dead black eyes and the woman went crazy over him. You seen such a party?"

Pry had to admit he knew no one of this description. Sanborn, finding he had a sympathetic audience, waxed more confidental. He brought out a package wrapped in buckskin and, unrolling it, displayed a faded, yellow tintype. It was a very imperfect likeness of a fine-featured, blonde woman dressed in hoop skirts and the flounces and ruffles of an early period.

"Her mother," said Sanborn brokenly. "But Jessie was the very image of her. You shore you never seen a gal who looked like this?"

Both Pry and Hod assured Sanborn that they had not and, after promising to keep a lookout and to communicate with the bereaved parent by letter addressed to Jamarillo, they continued their journey uptown. Emerging from the thick bush, they entered a narrow, rutty dirt street bordered on both sides by flat-roof, floorless, windowless Mexican adobes. Through the open doorways they could see figures moving about in the obscurity of these dwellings. Swarthy faces appeared. Black

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eyes scrutinized them.

Hod felt as if he were walking into an ambush. He had been shot at and hunted down so much that he expected to see flame spurt out of the darkness at any moment and to heart the report of rifle or revolver. In his heart he knew that these Mexicans were harmless; much more harmless than their wild American brothers who filled the lighted streets, a few blocks distant, from wall to wall with their horses, wagons, camp outfits and carousing parties. Presently they mingled with this crowd and were swallowed up in it. They heard someone talking about a shooting at the Welcome Home bar, but it did not seem to cause much excitement. Evidently murder was common in Jamarillo.

"This crowd hides us fine," said Old Pry. "If luck's with us and you don't lose control of yore tongue, we're likely to git out of here without being seen. Fust off let's git some grub. I'm so holler my heart and liver rattles like the seeds in a gourd. They ain't hardly nobody over there where the sign says Eats. Mosey."

THEY thrust through the crowd of Mexicans, Indians, half breeds, mule skinners, section hands, trainmen, gamblers, city toughs and cowboys toward the restaurant. The whistle of a locomotive broke the silence. At the far end of town, amid a maze of corrals and sheds and warehouses, a cattle train began to move. It was a reminder that the rails had come to the San Madrone country, bringing a horde of strange characters, good and bad, to the once peaceful town of Jamarillo. Odd jargons assailed their ears. Men, and Americans at that, spoke in a language that neither Hod Farlin nor Old Tom Pry could understand. "I nabbed a rattler out of Chi and was goin' good when I had to lay me rod to the nut of a shack——" "She's gooseberry pickin's I tells him. Then he overloads the grease, we git a rumble and——" "Remember what that bull said to me when his nibs hands me a valentine——"

"Crook talk," said Hod. "I never saw such a tough bunch."

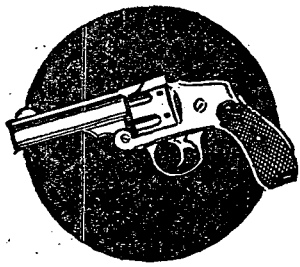
A burst of gunfire broke in on his words. The crowd surged back out of the street. A cowpuncher romped through the lane of human bodies, waving his hat in the air with one hand and firing his six-shooter with the other while he yelled at the top of his voice:

"Whoop-ee! Whoop-ee!"

Hod Farlin ducked back out of sight. Pry started up the steps of the restaurant. The rider was Skinner Roslin and he reminded them of the danger of delay.

"We'll line our gizzards with some hot victuals, buy you a hoss and then git our plunder and drift," said the old man. "And don't you spill nothin' between yore teeth. Them teeth was pervided for two purposes, one bein' to chaw bacon rind and t'other to corral langwidge that needs gentlin' afore it can be turned loose on the range."

For the next half hour both fugitives kept busy stoking away food while they watched the door. The rush hour at the restaurant was past and the long counter was empty except for Hod and Pry. The waiter watched the two dust-stained, trail-worn men wolf down the meat and bread and his curiosity concerning them increased. With their guns tied down in a business-like manner, the fugitives certainly made an acceptable picture of two Western badmen.



"You fellows see the shootin' over at the Welcome Home?" he asked tentatively. "No? Well, I was there. That hoghead should of knowed better than to call Milt Travers. This yere engine driver starts reachin' for a little nickel-plated peashooter and Milt drills him clean as a whistle."

Hod glanced at Pry. Both were thinking of the same thing. Travers was the name of the man that Sanborn was hunting. The fellow might be just impudent enough not to change it.

"What sort of a chap is Travers?" asked Hod.

"Oh, don't you know Milt Travers?"

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retorted the waiter in a patronizing tone. "Well, if you expect to stay here, you better see him. He's king pin in this town. You cain't miss him. He owns the Welcome Home and is there most of the time; a white-haired man with black eyes."

HOD and Pry both became silent. Hod was thinking that poor old Sanborn had at last reached the end of his trail and he was wondering what the result would be if the old man went up against this Travers in his own saloon with a gun. The waiter was talking on, telling about the black smallpox epidemic at Coyote Wells.

"——it was a great joke on the Wolf," Hod heard him say. "The Wolf and his men busted into Coyote Wells hell-bent to rob the town. You should of seen them scoot when they seen what was up. The Wolf took one look at their faces all pock-marked, swelled out of shape—then he set the road afire gittin' away. They say he walked right into the Wells Fargo and smack up to the agent. This agent had them pimples on his forehead and his map looked like he was havin' the mumps. When Wolf stuck a gun in his face he gags and chokes and says, 'I got the smallpox!' Then all over the counter right in front of the Wolf he——"

"Who is this Wolf?" Hod interrupted hurriedly, in an effort to stem the painful realism before it became acute.

"Ain't you heard of the Wolf?" demanded the waiter scornfully. "Well, you must be from the sticks. He's a robber that has been doing right good by himself here in Jamarillo and off'n the ranches. They say he steals cattle as well as money. 'Course I ain't never seen him, but them that has says he sure is deadly. Where you fellers from?"

The question came so suddenly that it caught Hod unawares.

"Wild Cat," he replied, without thinking.

Pry got to his feet, threw some money on the counter and pushed Hod off the stool. The old buckaroo was growling under his breath and the tenderfoot knew that he had committed another mistake and that Pry was bursting with words.

"There was no harm telling him that," protested Hod, as Pry shunted him out of the place onto the crowded walk.

"The hell they ain't," snapped Pry. "In half a hour everybody here will know about us. It's just the same as if yeh walked up to Deppity Sheriff McArdle and in yore sweet and smilin' way says, 'Here we are, Mister McArdle!' Damnation! You shore have got the hoof-an-mouth disease. Ever' time you open your mouth you put yore hoof in it."

OLD PRY hazed the tenderfoot off the main street into the shadow of a building and gazed around thoughtfully while he masticated his cud.

"I don't know what in the name of sin to do with yeh while I'm rustlin' them supplies," he finally said. "If both of us go together, we're more liable to be spotted."

"I've got my own program," said Hod stiffly.

Old Pry's face broke into a broad grin and he scanned the tenderfoot from heel to hat as if he were some strange bug.

"Do tell!" he jeered. "I reckon you ain't satisfied with the misery you've corraled already so yo're goin' out lookin' for more."

"I'm going to help Sanborn out," persisted Hod stubbornly. "If we let things ride, this snake Travers will kill the old man. While you are rustling supplies I'll go down to the Welcome Home bar and see if I can spot Travers or Sanborn's daughter."

The runty buckaroo fluffed up to the big tenderfoot like a bantam to a Plymouth Rock. His cracked voice rose to a higher pitch when he said:

"It's a waste of breath! I just got through warnin' you not to butt into other folks affairs and here yeh are hankerin' to tie into the tenderloin boss of Jamarillo, and all over a gal we never seed and a ole man that likes as not is a blamed liar."

Hod's great paw descended upon Old Pry's shoulder with a force that snapped his words off short. He yanked the old buckaroo over against the wall, and pinned him in place.

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"Get this straight now, Tom," he said. "I'm not a tenderfoot any longer. I've demonstrated that I can take care of myself more than once. I don't mind you blowing off like a gas bag as long as it does not interfere with my plans. Just at this minute I'll take the floor. My first concern is for Sanborn because he is in deadly peril. But there's another reason why we can't leave Jamarillo so quick as we figured."

"What other reason?" asked Pry, with surprising mildness.

"Callen's gang is here, I made charges against him in Wild Cat to stop Helena Masters from going into a cattle deal with him. I said that Skinner Roslin was in on his crooked scheme and that Helena's brother-in-law and superintendent, Malott, was either a dupe or a fool."

"And you couldn't prove any of it," interrupted Pry.

"If they'd have given me time, I could, but they ran me out of town. You remember it was here that Malott met Callen and first entered into the deal. Well, Malott is here again and with Callen."

CHAPTER III

MURDER!

"LOOK right across the street there in front of the barber shop."

Over the heads of the passing throng they could see the blackbearded Callen talking to a very thin, weak-chinned man of medium size. This was Malott, brother-in-law of the girl owner of Rico ranch, and a wastrel who spent all his money over the gaming table. Many times Helena Masters had been forced to pay for Malott's extravagance. That was one thing that had made Hod Farlin suspicious of a cattle deal that the two men had cooked up.

"Perhaps if we plays our cards right, Tom, we'll be able to get the goods on that outfit. Then we'll be able to go back home again. Just the minute we prove that Callen is crooked, that squashes his case against us and the sheriff will call off the posse."

Old Pry took a hitch in his belt and started away. "Come on," he snapped. "We'll raid the Welcome Home together. Long as I'm darned fool enough to throw in with yeh, I might as well go all the way."

Boldly the two fugitives crossed the street and angled toward the big sign, WELCOME HOME. They ran the risk at any moment of encountering Callen, Malott, Skinner Roslin or the deputy sheriff, all of whom were on the lookout for them and they realized that in such a mob there would be small chance of escape, but they gave this no heed.

Hod had to throw his shoulder against the swinging doors to push them in, so great was the jam. At the bar men stood two deep. An old fiddler sat on a raised dais sawing away at a violin while a girl beside him sang in a high nasal voice. One glance told Hod that this girl did not resemble the beauty of the tintype. They pressed and shoved their way around the room, past the green-topped tables where men in their shirt sleeves presided over the various gambling layouts. At the door giving entrance to the quarters of the dance girls, Hod inquired discreetly of a woman for Jessie Sanborn, describing her.

The woman drew back from him, her eyes full of suspicion. Then glancing around fearfully she stepped close, caught Hod's arm and asked:

"Are you a friend of hers? If you are you must be careful. Milt has been warned. You must not come here asking for Jessie Sanborn."

"Is she here?" persisted Hod.

"No," replied the woman, and her words carried conviction. "Milt heard her father was coming. He took her away, I don't know where." Then she closed up like a clam and would say no more.

"Guess we've run into a first-class skunk that makes Callen and his gang look like angel," opined Old Tom Pry. "This feller Travers ain't in the diggins now, that's a cinch. You and me better clear out and come back later."

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A sudden fear gripped Hod Farlin. He took the lead in heading for the chaparral and he did not stop for Pry to catch up until he was within a stone's throw of Sanborn's camp. Now that it was time for swift action his youth told in his favor. Though Pry was the more seasoned plainsman, some of the gimp of his early days was gone. He seemed content to follow the lead of this young tenderfoot giant, chuckling as he stumbled along in his high-heeled boots on spindly bow legs that persistently refused to track, grinning in the hope that Hod would get himself into another mess that the old buckaroo would have to pry him loose from, thus giving him something to crow about.

"I hate to do it," said Hod Farlin, "but I've got to warn Sanborn. I suppose I'm just shooting him into trouble, mebby death, but if he stumbled onto Travers he'd get killed anyhow. I've got to tell him."

PRY made no objections and they continued on to Sanborn's camp. His fire had died down to a bed of coals. His horses stood nearby, undisturbed, noses in their feedbags.

Hod started to walk right up to the camp, but Old Pry jerked him back.

"Allus holler before you walk in on anybody," he advised. "Some day you'll git a bullet through your livelihood, tearin' up to a stranger's front door so unpolite. Hello, the tent! Hi ya, Sanborn!"

They waited a moment. There was no answer. A feeling of dread swept over Hod Farlin. Without waiting for Pry to repeat the call he plunged through the brush and into the tiny clearing. In another moment he had dropped to his knees beside a form huddled there within the circle of firelight. It was Sanborn. From a perforation in the center of his forehead oozed a brown fluid. He was stone dead. Clasped in one hand was the tintype of his wife.

When Hod rose to his feet he held the tintype in his fingers. He saw Old Pry crouched forward, his little round eyes gleaming, his claw-like, almost fleshless fingers opening and closing like the talons of a dying eagle. The long, flat-chinned, wrinkled features of the buckaroo were contorted into a hideous mask. Hod knew the meaning of that look. At last the aged mustanger was on the prod. When he spoke his words were in strange contrast to his manner.

"No need to notify the sheriff," he said softly. "We know who done it. Let's travel."

THEY visited every saloon and gambling den in Jamarillo. Travers was in none of them. Hod Farlin knew what would happen the instant Pry caught sight of the gambler. He had seen the old mustanger in action before. No words would be wasted. Pry would simply walk up and shoot him. By a miracle they missed Callen and his gang.

At last they had to give up the search. "We'll git our outfit and try again," said the indomitable old man. "Fust off we got to get you a new bronc so's we c'n get shet of the claybank you borried, afore Callen finds out he loaned it to you. This way to the hoss corral."

After discarding a number of horses that looked to Hod Farlin to be good enough, Pry recommended the purchase of an ugly little dun and then left to purchase supplies while Hod completed the deal.

"You should have a bigger horse," said the dealer after Pry had gone. "Come over here and look at this black. I can let you have him at the same price as the dun, sixty dollars."

The black mustang was a much finer appearing animal than the dun. It was heavier-bodied, longer-coupled and held its head proudly while the dun's head continually drooped. Hod finally purchased the black, paid over thte money and rode the animal bareback, using the hackamore, to the place where they had staked out the stolen claybank. Removing the halter from the Anchor C claybank, Hod drove the pilfered bronco out of camp. Now at least he was safe from arrest as a horse thief. Next he saddled and bridled the black and left him with reins atrail. He had a feeling that they were going to get action soon and he wanted a fresh horse ready for flight or attack.

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"Guess I'm not so tender," he thought proudly, as he cinched up the saddle. "I certainly have learned a lot of Western lore in the last few months. Pry has been a good teacher, but I think I've got just about all he can teach me."

His thoughts shifted to the new developments and the adventures promised in Jamarillo. Though the lightning had not yet struck, he knew it was in the air. Peril lurked just around the corner. Callen and his men had chased them almost into the streets of Jamarillo. Night had come just in time to save them. Had it not been dusk, the three gunmen would have invaded Arroyo Norte, would have found Hod and Pry, and there would have been a battle with but one possible outcome. Posses from Jamarillo would have captured the fugitives.

As if this were not trouble enough they had adopted Sanborn's quarrel and gone to war against the most powerful underworld figure in Jamarillo, Milt Travers. Finally they had the task of trying to ferret out the secrets of Callen and of discovering the meaning of Malott's presence here with the black-beard's gang.

Hod examined his six-shooter, dropped it back into the holster and practiced drawing rapidly as Pry had taught him. He was thus occupied when Old Tom came staggering up under two gunnysacks full of supplies as big as himself. He had an extra box of .45's and another of .30-30's for each of them and these they stowed away in their clothes. The grub was divided into two packages and hidden away in the brush. Hod waited until Pry had his own mustang saddled and was ready to mount before he brought his purchase forward proudly from the shadow of a tree.

Old Pry's mouth popped open at sight of the black, but he did not say a word. Instead he approached the mustang, circled around it like a dog baying a strange cat and then closed in.

"I got him for the same price as you wanted to pay for the runty dun," said Hod proudly. "I suppose you'll have some fault to find with him."

Old Pry suddenly grabbed the black by the throat. The animal reared and tried to escape, but Pry held onto his throat like a bulldog.

"Hey, what you tryin' to do?" protested Hod. "Quit choking my hoss."

Pry released his grip. The horse coughed, a broken, rattling, wheezing cough that alarmed Hod. The crazy old mustanger had half killed his new-bought bronc. The buckaroo struck the black a sharp blow on the belly. The mustang shied away with a loud grunt. Vague doubts began to cloud Hod Farlin's mind.

OLD PRY turned away without a word and swung atop his own mustang.

"What's wrong with this horse?" demanded the tenderfoot.

Pry regarded Hod in comic surprise.

"Did I say they was anything wrong with him?" he asked.

"There always is something wrong with everything I do," retorted Hod bitterly. "I suppose you've got some fault to find with him."

They were moving side by side up the trail out of the brush, heading toward Jamarillo.

"Not any," replied Pry. "I wouldn't say a word agin yore choice of a mustang."

They rode in silence for a full minute. Then Hod could stand the suspense no longer.

"But there is something wrong," he insisted. "What is it? Have I made a bad mistake?"

"Not so bad. You couldn't beat this hoss—for coyote bait. Head over toward the hoss corral. I'm goin' to git yore money back. If you'd a gone out to get a specimen for a vet'nary, you couldn't a done better. You turned down a nice, sound little dun for this cowhocked, wind-galled, ringboned, roach-back, broken-winded roarer. He's good for next to nothing. In a quarter-mile race with a flock of tombstones, he'd lose out by half a mile."

He rode with the buckaroo toward the

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corral without a word. He realized that he had made a serious blunder. Old Pry suddenly pulled up his horse and motioned for Hod to stop. Directly in front of them was the horse corral. About the gate were gathered a group of mounted men: Pete Callen, Skinner Roslin, Deputy Sheriff McArdle, and Malott. The horse dealer sat on the fence, smoking a cigar and talking to the posse.

"The greenhorn was a big, red-headed feller and his partner a little, sawed-off turnip," the dealer was saying. "Are them the ones?"

"That's them," said Callen hoarsely. "And you say you think they'll come back?"

The dealer laughed softly, as if enjoying a good joke.

"They'll be back here shore. I sold the tenderfoot that black roarer which Travers left here to be took out and shot. When the little mustanger sees him he'll bust his galluses a'comin'. I'm all set for him. I got Seth Wiggins hidin' there in the shed with a double bar'l shotgun loaded with buck."

A roar of mirth went up from the possemen. The horse dealer preened himself and puffed out his chest. Callen proposed that the posse hide nearby to watch the fun. Skinner objected. He wanted to get back to the bright lights. Callen and McArdle decided to remain and Skinner and Malott went back uptown.

"They'll have to crawl into a prairie-dog hole and pull the hole in after 'em if they want to git away now," said Callen. "Good thing for us that Hod Farlin is so plumb tender."

Pry and Hod beat a retreat. There was nothing else to do. If they started a fight they would have the whole town down on them. They halted in the shadow of a cholla clump on the edge of the town.

"This invalid mustang queers our getaway," said Pry. "I got to get you another hoss if I have to steal one. I got a hunch that when we start swappin' lead with Milt Travers and his gang the best hoss flesh won't be none too good. You think anything c'n happen to you if you wait here for me? You ain't liable to start pickin' them chollas thinkin' they're roses, are yeh?"

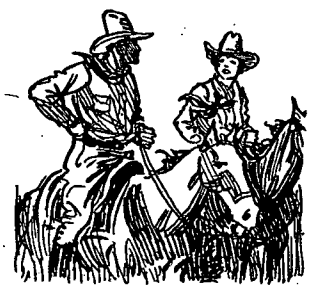
"I'll stay," said the chastened tenderfoot. "I've learned my lesson."

He watched Pry ride away and approach the uptown district along an unfrequented path that wound out into the trackless waste. Then the old man was lost in the crowd. As the minutes passed Hod became more and more impatient. The cold of the desert night bit through his clothing and into the skin. His eyes picking up each passing horseman settled on a pair of riders, a man and a woman. The next moment he was out of his shelter and after them.

Chapter IV

THE HAT TRICK

RIDING stirrup to stirrup, astride two perfectly matched cream mustangs, the man and the girl made a pretty picture as they moved leisurely along. Young Sidney, owner of the 909 ranch, the accepted suitor of Helena Masters, was leaning toward the girl and talking to her in a confidential manner. She was listening with an intentness that sent a thrill of jealousy through Hod Farlin. With his big, gray sombrero pushed back from his brow, a silk handkerchief knotted about his neck, attired in stylish whipcord riding suit and cordovan boots, Sidney presented an attractive type of rich rancher. Clean cut, newly shaven, blond hair neatly trimmed, the soft spoken cattleman held a strong appeal for Helena who had known him all his life.



Watching them, the bristly bearded tenderfoot, in his torn and battered attire, suddenly felt the depth of his unworthiness. Poor as he was, a fugitive from justice, scraggly hair hanging down over his ears, a newcomer and an intruder, he first began to realize the hopelessness of a contest with Sidney for the favor of the girl. Helena herself had ridiculed Hod as a

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greenhorn, an outsider, and had very definitely shown him his place. Yet he still hung on to the forlorn hope.

Drowning an impulse to ride up and confront her, he thrust his horse back into the thicket, tied him and followed briskly on foot. He wanted to try once more to warn her against the men he believed were planning to swindle her, Callen, Skinner Roslin, her brother-in-law, Malott. Then he realized that he would only be throwing himself open to further insult and contented himself with basking in reflected glory at a distance.

Helena Masters was enough to turn the head of any man. Dressed in a smart riding outfit, lithe body swaying to the movements of her horse, head carried high and arrogantly, she held the attention of all the crowd. Her dark and luminous eyes were sparkling. She seemed in the best of spirits. Hod puzzled at her attitude. Why had she come riding into Jamarillo at this time of night with the 909 ranch owner? That was a strange thing for a cattle-country girl to do. Could it be that she and Sidney were already married?

Helena urged the cream into a running walk. Hod lost sight of them. The intoxication left him, and he remembered that Old Pry would be returning soon to look for him and that he had promised not to leave that spot.

He started back, keeping to the inside of the walk to avoid the crowd. He felt his hat snatched from his head and turned in time to see it sailing into a dark alley. The crowd swept on, engulfing the practical joker so far as Hod could make out. The tenderfoot hurried into the dark recess and stopped to pick up his hat. Something hard jabbed against his ribs.

"Hold your breath, you hick," said a voice. "Keep your mitts down but don't make a move. I'll take this rod first."

HOD held perfectly still, while his mind raced with chaotic thoughts. Once more he had been played for a boob. The hat trick had been used by this city crook, and he had fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. He felt his new .45 six-shooter jerked from its holster; felt deft, experienced fingers frisking through his clothes; then his cartridge belt and holster came away and the pressure of the gun barrel relaxed. The thug had cleaned him out. His watch, money, hunting knife, revolver, the spare cartridges that Pry had just bought—all were gone.

He moved tentatively. Nothing happened. He turned his head. No one was in sight. Then he whirled around to find the alley empty and not even the sound of a footfall to tell him which direction the footpad had taken. He ran to the rear end of the alley and looked in every direction. A drunk came flying out of the back door of a saloon, propelled by a large boot. A black-clad Mexican woman, carrying an armload of fagots, disappeared into one of the jacales. No one else was in sight.

Conquering an impulse to dash along this back thoroughfare in the hope of seeing the holdup man, Hod turned and retraced his steps to the hidden horse. Pry had not returned yet, and Hod found himself dreading the encounter. The old mustanger's impatience surely would reach the saturation point soon. If he kept up his foolish stunts, there would come a time when even Old Tom Pry would leave him. At the moment when they were most in need of fast and reliable mounts, he had discarded Pry's selection to buy a horse with a ruptured lung. Now that a good gun might mean the difference between life and death, he had allowed himself to be disarmed. Not only that but he was flat broke, stripped of every cent with which he might buy another gun and horse, and he knew the buckaroo had no money to lend him.

Tom Pry rode out of the brush back of him and swung to the ground.

"I've located a hoss for you," he said. "Ain't much, but it'll only set you back $25. I had to steer clear of the hoss corral. We'll deal with that mustang trader some other time when he ain't got a man cached in the shed with a shotgun. Guess this albino, Travers, ain't in town, 'cordin' to what I hear. Let's hop along and git that hoss."

"Can't be done," said Hod miserably. "I'm busted."

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Old Pry glanced at the tenderfoot, saw that he had been stripped of cartridge belt, holster and gun, and then he became very, very quiet. Hod blurted out the details. Pry did not appear to hear him. The little old buckaroo seemed to be in a daze, eyes fixed intently upon the tenderfoot, his monkey face screwed up into an expression of incredulity, jaw slack.

When Hod finished his story, Pry rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes and shook his head firmly.

"No, it cain't be true," he muttered. "I'm asleep and dreamin'. It ain't possible for anybody to be so many different kinds of a tee-totally bedamned lunkhead. I must be dead and don't know it."

"All right, rub it in," growled Hod. "I got it coming."

The buckaroo squatted down, produced the makin's and rolled a cigarette on his knees. Hiding here in this thicket in the midst of his enemies, a fugitive from justice with a posse right on his hocks, burdened by a partner who had just rendered himself horseless and gunless, Old Tom Pry still had time to make a neat job of the tightly rolled brown paper pill. A match flamed and Old Tom Pry blew a cloud of smoke through his nostrils with a great sigh of contentment.

"Boy, you've give me a new lease on life," said the buckaroo after a minute's silence. "Yo're as full of surprises as a buckin' horse with a burr on him. When you come I was jest ready to go off somewheres and die. Peared like they warn't nothin' worth livin' for. Then you come bobbin' over the horizon, started stickin' yore snoot in other folk's business and the fun began."

"You don't have to stick with me," said Hod. "It's not yore war and I never invited you to join it."

THE old mustanger ignored the comment. He mounted and motioned for Hod to do likewise. Then without a word he led the way toward Arroyo Norte. Once in the shelter of the thicker growth, he trailed along the edge of the wash until he came to a deserted adobe. They halted in the shadows of the bush and glanced around them. The old adobe was on the edge of the Mexican quarter.

"Stake the crowbait out here," commanded Pry. "Loosen the cinches, but don't take off the saddle."

Hod complied, unquestioning. When he came over to Pry the old man was counting his money. It consisted of only a few pieces of silver.

"I ain't got enough to buy you no horse or gun, either," said the mustanger, "and yet you got to have both. Did them body snatchers pass up anything when they robbed yeh?"

"Not even my knife," replied Hod. "But see here, you don't have to worry about me. I'll make out."

"Langwidge!" burst out Pry. "Yo're allus spillin' langwidge that don't mean nothing. Wonder to me you got any room in yore carcass for yore vital organs the way yo're chuck full of grammar. How in hell you goin' to git this feller Travers without a gun? How you goin' to escape Callen and his outfit without a horse? Now listen. I'm goin' up against that faro layout at the Pay Dirt. I looked it over, and I think I c'n beat it. I may have to put up my six-shooter, but I'll win. I ain't goin' to ask you to stay hid, but will yeh please leave this hunk of buzzard meat cached out here so's we'll have a saddle to put on a hoss when I rustle yeh one?"

"Suppose you lose your gun," objected Hod. "Then we will be up against it."

"I won't lose it," declared Pry. "I'll meet you later at this old adobe. This is our headquarters. If you bed down in there, watch out for pizen insecks. What you aim to do while I'm gone?"

"I'll watch out for the albino and for Callen and his gang," replied Hod. "If I keep in the shadows I won't be seen. And I've got nothing to lose to robbers now."

Old Pry considered this for a moment.

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Then he commanded Hod to wait and he disappeared in the direction of a big frame building where a Mexican *baile* was in progress. A few minutes later the mustanger returned with something in his hands. It was a steeple-crowned, bell-brimmed Mexican sombrero. He cut open the fruit of a prickly pear, rubbed the stain thoroughly into Hod's beard and skin and slapped the sombrero on his head.

"Yo're purty big for a Mex," he said, "but if you scrooch down in passin' anybody, you'll do in the shadders. Now you can go out and collect all the misery you ain't corralled already if they is any, pervidin' only one thing. You stay away from me."

THE old buckaroo departed. Hod watched him disappear. Then started uptown on foot. Despite his setbacks, despite the hopelessness of his suit for Helena, he was not discouraged. Stirred by the prospect of action, tingling with the sense of adventure, he forgot that he was unarmed and helpless in a town where every man went heeled.

Jamarillo lay before him like an enchanted city; a pigmy creation of man in the maws of the brooding mountain. From the *baile* came sounds of rhythmic dance music, the tap of high heels on the floor, the thrill of girlish laughter and the low hum of conversation. Above him on a verandah a guitar tinkled softly. On the great white way of the cowtown, gleaming paths of light appeared and vanished as doors swung open and shut.

Jagged mountain peaks pricked the sky where a great stone rampart walled off the village on one side. The blackened leagues of the San Madrone desert stretched away in another direction. Over all the petty human sounds lay the great silence of the wilderness, a cold silence of lonely gorges, of broad plains hemmed in by giant mesas, of the desolate, unending, monotonous desert and of vaulted heavens of the deepest blue, ablaze with the glitter of myriads of stars.

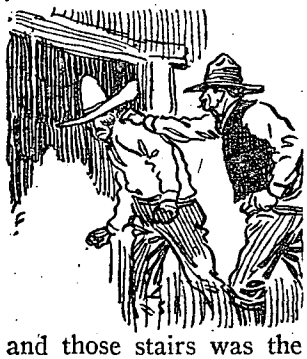
Such were Hod Farlin's thoughts when he saw Helena on the second-story verandah of the Jamarillo Hotel.

CHAPTER V

GUN PLAY

SHE stood out for a moment on the little balcony, the moon making ebony gloss of her black hair, her figure outlined by the lamplight that fell through the door. Then she vanished inside, leaving Hod Farlin atingle with a strange fever that filled his mind with crazy thoughts. Before he realized it he was making his way rapidly toward the hotel, oblivious of the necessity for concealment, forgetting that he was unarmed.

He was not ready to believe that Helena and Sidney were man and wife. They had made no plans for immediate marriage that he had heard of and he had made discreet inquiries. What, then, was the girl owner of the Rico rancho doing here at midnight in the Hotel Jamarillo? Women did not do such things in the range country. There was something mysterious about it and Hod made up his mind to get to the bottom of it. He had learned nothing of caution from his past experiences. He saw a fair lady in danger, as he thought, and he promptly hied himself to her rescue.



Halting a moment at the side door to the hotel he took in the situation. The hotel desk was directly across the room from where he stood. At the left end of this desk were the stairs. Between him and those stairs was the alert clerk, who watched everyone who went up or down, and a group of guests, all men. Hod only waited to make sure that none of Callen's gang were present, then he opened the front door and stalked straight toward the stairs.

"Hi there, hombre! No Mex allowed!"

The clerk was waving a fat hand at him. Hod realized for the first time that he was disguised as a Mexican. He had forgotten all about it in his eagerness. He hesitated for a fraction of a second. It

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was not in him to retreat. He hardly gave the idea a thought. Once started, Hod Farlin always kept going. He hit the stairs on the jump and was at the top before he heard the pounding heels and loud voices of his pursuers. "Get that oiler!" the clerk was shouting. "Get that feller out o' here! If he goes for his knife, shoot."

One moment he paused at the stairhead; then he flew toward the hanging kerosene lamp and turned it clear out, plunging the hall into darkness. A match flared on the stairs. Hod saw the face of a man and a hand that held a gun. His back was against a door and he fumbled for the knob. He had no time to look to see whether a light came under the door. He turned the knob noiselessly, swung open the door, slipped in and closed it after him. There was a light in the room.

SEATED around a table in the center of the room was a group of men whose faces reflected the astonishment that shone in his own. If he had elected to hunt up all his enemies and put them in one room he could not have done better. The gleaming buck teeth of Skinner Roslin, the black, porcupine beard of heavy-jowled Pete Callen, the flabby, purplish countenance of Deputy Sheriff McArdle, the weak-chinned frontispiece of Jack Malott, and finally the man he and Pry had been seeking all night—Milt Travers. There was no mistaking the unnaturally white hair and pale complexion nor the glassy black eyes of the man who had killed Old John Sanborn. What irony it was that after hunting him all this time, Hod should come upon him when unarmed! All these thoughts raced through his mind in the moment before he saw Skinner's hand drop downward.

Hod caught that sinister movement, heard the grating of the chair as it was pushed back and he plunged out through the door into the hall as the gun crashed. There was a splintering of wood, the beating of explosions upon his eardrums and he saw the panel split. The place was filled with smoke and the acrid odor of powder. Yells sounded from the gamblers' room, the clatter of chairs, the crash of a table, the ring of falling poker chips. Dark figures, that had been darting about the hall, dived for the stairway, cutting off escape in that direction. He glanced toward the door opening out onto the verandah and considered for a split second dashing out that way; then he realized that in the moment he was exposed to the light there he would be shot down and he tore at the knob of an adjoining room. It held. He threw his shoulder against the panel and the filmy lock gave. He swung the door shut again, just as Callen's men burst into the hall.

A muffled gasp behind him caused him to half turn. Then abruptly he became rigid and his hands went up.

"I've got you covered," said a girl's voice. "Keep 'em up or I'll shoot."

Hod kept 'em up. He could hear Callen out in the hall bellowing for a light; demanding that every room in the place be searched. He could also hear the quick sharp breathing of the girl who was trying to control her fear, and he was very, very careful not to make a single move that would excite her to panic.

"What do you want here, señor? What is the matter?" Her voice was still low, but firmer. Hod recognized the tone and a great joy leaped through him. He started to turn, but her voice, coming a little shriller, warned him.

"I had to see you, Helena," he said in his natural voice. "It is I, Hod Farlin."

He turned then to look into her startled eyes across a table littered with documents. The muzzle of her revolver drooped. For a second or two she was too astonished for words. Color came into her cheeks. Her eyes flashed angrily.

"Well, what is the meaning of this intrusion?" she demanded curtly.

"I saw you here. I had to come. I——"

"Of course, you had to interfere. That seems to be your favorite pastime. You seem to be suffering under the delusion that I need your advice. Well, let me tell you, Farlin, I've had quite enough of your impudence. Will you please go now?"

A GRIN cleft the dirt-streaked features of Hod Farlin.

"You hear all that racket out there?"

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he asked. "Well, that is Callen and his gang waiting to plug me the minute I step through that door. I just stepped in on them, Callen and his gang and your prize brother-in-law I've been trying to warn you against, conspiring in this room right next to yours!"

A look of despair crossed the girl's features. She began hurriedly picking up the papers from the table and stuffing them into a bag.

"You've ruined everything," she said in a dull voice. She ceased speaking as Callen's voice sounded again in the hall. "Knock on the door, clerk," Callen was saying. "Make 'em open up. We want to look in every room. I'll find out if a damned Mex can butt in on us thisaway."

Helena flew to the bed and tore off the sheets. "Make ropes of them," she commanded. "Hurry!" She pushed the old pine dresser against the door and hurried back just as Hod was wedging a chair into the open window with one end of the rope tied to it.

"Thanks for helping me get away," he whispered.

"You!" she blurted. "It is I that must escape. They must not find me here. You brought this down on me, and it is up to you to get me out of it."

A knock sounded at the door. The clerk's voice was calling Miss Briggs. "That's the name I registered under," whispered Helena. "Hurry please, hurry!" And aloud she said, "Yes, what is it? What do you want?"

"You'll have to open the door." The clerk's voice quavered. Hod had the rope all secured, ready to lower through the open window to the alleyway below.

"It's a deppity sheriff," wailed the clerk. "He's searching the place for a thief."

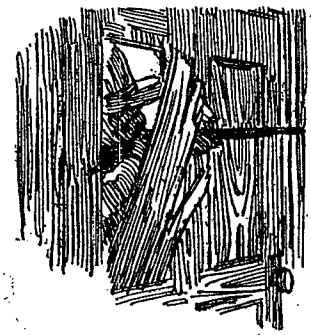
"I am not dressed," protested Helena hurriedly. "You'll have to wait." Hod was fastening the rope around her waist and telling her how she could loosen it quickly when she reached the ground.

Something heavy struck the door a sharp blow. Callen's bellowing voice drowned out the protests of the clerk as he tried to force entrance. The pine dresser began to move. Hod shoved the bed against it, pressed hard on it with one foot and lowered the girl over the sill.

A bullet crashed through the panel high up.

"That is just a warning," snarled Callen. "The next one will be lower."

Helena's feet touched the ground. Hod went over the sill just as a fusillade of bullets sent glass and splinters raining down on him, and started down the rope, hand over hand. Helena had vanished. The instant she was loose she had darted away. Something thudded into the wall on a level with Hod Farlin's head. Below on the street a gun barked. Hod saw the flash and realized that the man was shooting at him from a couple of hundred feet distance.



Loosening his grip he slid rapidly downward. Bullets were singing close. He felt something sting his arm and he released all holds to plunge downward. He lit in a heap, and as he rose a sharp pain shot through his ankle.

"Stop there! Halt!" cried a voice in the dark.

Dodging low, Hod ran around the building and headed for the chaparral. Spots of flame winked at him out of the night. The air became hideous with the rattle of gunfire and the yelling of excited men. He drew a deep breath as he dodged into an ocotillo thicket and turned off toward the old adobe, paralleling Arroyo Norte. If he could reach the black mustang, the aged derelict of a horse might be able to carry him to safety. The din and hubbub spread. The sound of a horse tearing through the brush warned him that mounted men had taken up the hunt. He was being surrounded. He flattened to the ground beneath a mesquite bush. A horseman swept by so close that the hoofs almost struck his outstretched hand.

Realizing that he could not escape men on foot so easily, he got up again and staggered on. His ankle felt as if pins and needles were being driven into it.

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HE HAD one satisfaction. Callen and his men had not recognized him. They still thought he was a thief who had invaded the hotel, perhaps with the intention of robbing the game. Even in his moment of peril the tenderfoot could not help wondering what had happened to Helena; whether she was safe or whether she had been caught by the same people that had spotted him and shot at him.

His breath was coming in gasps. His ankle kept giving way beneath him and the pain became intolerable. He sank down and began crawling, deep into a thicket; then abruptly he jumped up with a spurt of energy. He had heard the creaking of saddle leather and then the snort of a horse. There was the black mustang, looking straight at him, head up, nostrils dilated. He spoke a soothing word, released the stake rope and swung his weight against a stirrup.

Pursuing horsemen were crashing into the brush so close he caught glimpses of them. He started to rise to the seat. He had a sickening feeling of falling. The saddle was turning. He remembered now that he had loosened the cinches. It gave way and he fell backward, half flinging himself behind a creosote clump into the stinging embrace of a patch of cholla.

The broken-winded mustang, plunging and snorting with fear as the saddle flapped around under its belly, dashed down the incline toward the arroyo. A gun blared. "There he goes," yipped a voice Hod recognized as that of Skinner Roslin. "Plug him. There he goes into the wash." A roar of firearms followed. A half dozen guns were blazing at the riderless horse, though the gunmen could not see that he was riderless.

Hod rose as the mad rush of riders swept by, and limped toward the old adobe, rubbing frantically at the place where the cholla stung him. It seemed that every square of inch of his exposed flesh was burning like fire. This, added to the aching, biting throb of his ankle, left him in no good mood by the time he reached the rendezvous.

A figure rose from a dark corner of the adobe as Hod stepped in. The tenderfoot raised his hands over his head instinctively; then lowered them again as Pry's shrill snicker reached his ears.

"What's all the racket?" whispered the buckaroo. "Sounded like a Chihuahua revolution."

Hod did not reply. Instead he slumped down on the ground, breathing hard and began pulling off his boot.

"Well, boy, it's yore turn to hop on me," pursued Old Pry. "You got permission to land on me with both feet. I shore acted plumb childish."

Hod gave up the effort of removing his boot. It was too much. He glanced up at Pry, who was laughing softly, noiselessly as if at some good joke.

"Don't tell me we've had any more bad luck," grumbled the tenderfoot.

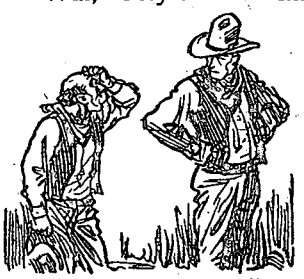
"Not back luck exactly," replied Pry. "I lost my six-shooter, that's all. Let 'em take it away from me like I was a blabbed calf. Ain't neither one of us heeled now. Only thing we got is our rifles, and you can't tote rifles in town for instant use." He turned with his back to Hod and stooped forward. "Kick me, kid, and kick me hard."

Hod managed a smile.

"You don't know half of it yet," he declared.

Old Pry popped around like a spun top.

"Wal, they's one thing sartan, you couldn't lose nothin' more cause you was cleaned out when I left. You may be onlucky and tender, but even you can't lose nothin' you ain't got."



Hod shook his head grimly. "You don't know me," he declared.

Old Pry became more and more uneasy. He stepped close to Hod and scrutinized him and his attire carefully.

"You still got yore pants," he summed up, "and you ain't lost yore shirt yet. I don't see yore appetite nowheres, but you shore never lose that. Looky here, if you've gone and done anything, spit it out."

Hod ceased dabbing at the poison cholla

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when he found it only made the inflammation worse, and leaned back against the wall. He could feel his ankle swelling and realized that he would soon have to remove his boot or it would have to be cut away, but he felt too tired for the effort.

"I saw Helena on the verandah of the Jamarillo House . . ." he began.

"Yeh, yeh, yeh!" burst out Pry, suddenly enlightened. "Now I savvy. Where the rattlesnake used to be the only pizen reptile, now we got the deadly female woman. You busted up there, I suppose!"

"I found Milt Travers."

Old Pry's head thrust forward like a hen about to strike at a fishworm. "And you warned him we was huntin' him, no doubt?" he said sarcastically.

"Travers was in a poker game with Callen's gang and Malott. It proves what I thought. They're all a bunch of crooks, trying to trim Helena. She may be wise at that. I found her in a room adjoining theirs with a bunch of papers piled on a table. I didn't get a chance to warn her or question her, we had to hop out of there so fast."

A GREAT light dawned on Old Tom Pry. He bobbed his head up and down sagely and sucked in his breath.

"Now I git it," he admitted. "It was yore birthday them gun rannies was celebratin' just now. I might a knowed it. Gawdamighty! I might a knowed it!" He stamped up and down the shed for a moment; then peered out of the door into the night. "Them fellers is comin' back," he said. "Hope they don't take a notion to look in here. Our goose is cooked if they do. We cain't stay here. They'll search all deserted shacks."

Hod made no attempt to move and Pry continued.

"They're busy at the other end of town now. Snap out of it and we'll git yore hoss. Mine's down the street a ways. We got to scoot."

"No need to go down there."

"But we got to get yore hoss."

"I got no hoss and it isn't down there," said Hod testily. "The posse got him." He did not say that he had forgotten to tighten the cinch he himself had loosened but an hour before and that this carelessness had caused the loss of the mustang and saddle.

"Danged if you got any horseshoes tied to you," groaned Pry. "Here's two foogitives that oughter be foogitin' hell bent and we're hamstrung; no guns, no money, no friends, and only one hoss. Partner, I guess you ain't goin' to be satisfied till you git some lead fillin' for yore wisdom teeth. Wal, we got one out. We can ride and tie."

Hod knew nothing about ride and tie, and Pry explained it. Hod could ride Pry's nigger-heeled gray to the three-prong-trail forks beyond Lava ride and tie him; then proceed on foot. Old Pry would walk to the forks, ride the gray another five miles, passing Hod on the way, and then tie him up for the tenderfoot. In this way the horse got some rest and both men could take turns riding.

"I can ride but not tie," said Hod. "I've got a bad ankle."

CHAPTER VI

HIDING OUT

TOM PRY leaped toward the roof, caught a rafter, turned a flip flop and came back to earth, jumping up and down on his hat.

"B-r-r-r-r!" he growled. "B-r-r-r-r!" And then he had another convulsion. For fifteen minutes he talked about Hod without once mentioning his name.

Hod Farlin ignored his wrathful utterances altogether.

"It's a real sprain," he pursued calmly. "I can feel it swelling. It's bulgin' up like a balloon. If I don't get this boot off pronto I'll have to cut it away——"

Old Pry darted toward the doorway; then raised his hand for silence. Hod limped to his side. A party of pursuers were coming straight toward them. They had the worthless black horse with them. As they came closer, the two fugitives recognized the black-beard, Callen, Skinner Roslin and McArdle. Milt Travers was not with them.

"I tell you this is that black roarer the hoss trader stung that tenderfoot with," they heard Callen say.

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"Then how come that Mex to be riding it?" asked Skinner.

"That wasn't no Mex. Remember how big he was? That was this Hod Farlin in disguise. He's up to something. Skinner, him and that little sawed-off runt he pals with."

There was a moment's silence. Then McArdle asked, "What about the gal in that room? Who was she?"

"The clerk never knowed her," said Callen. "She came in when the lobby was vacant and jest before the lights was lit with a kind of veil on and took that room. She wasn't no honky-tonk filly, neither. Reckon her and this tenderfoot were plannin' to work some kind of a game."

"Don't make sense exactly," objected McArdle. "It's more'n likely like the clerk figured. This feller was on the prowl. When the clerk come up after him he dodged into the first room, which was our'n. Then when Skinner throwed down on him he had to hide somewheres and he ducked into her place 'cause it was closest."

"All right then, who was the gal?" asked Skinner.

None of them could even guess the answer to that. It was evident that they had not seen Helena arrive with young Sidney or they would at least have mentioned her as a possibility. Hod was glad of that. He did not want the girl to get into any more trouble.

Callen pulled up his horse with a creaking of leather, a shuffle of hoofs and a low-voiced exclamation. His eyes were fixed squarely upon the fugitives. Had they not been concealed by the shadows, he must surely have seen them.

"There's another vacant shack," said the black-beard. "Surround it. I'm going to search every empty house in Jamarillo."

Hod could not restrain a sharp intake of his breath. He knew what would happen if Peter Callen caught them hiding in this place. After what had occurred in Wild Cat, he would shoot without mercy. His head was still bandaged from the clout Hod had administered with his gun barrel, and he had to take vengeance for the gangster the tenderfoot had killed in an earlier battle. If Callen was inclined to show mercy, the cold-blooded Skinner Roslin would shoot without the leader's sanction.

Hod did not mind a fight even against odds, but to crouch here in the dark like a couple of rabbits waiting to be chased from cover and butchered was too much.

"I can make a run for it, Tom," he whispered. "Sorry I got you into it. You lay low. If I bust out and dive for the brush, they won't look for you."

"Go to hell!" retorted Old Pry. "Can't you see I'm thinkin'?"

Suddenly a wail burst from Tom Pry's lips. It was a cry that could easily be heard by the posseman. Hod saw the riders pull up and fix their eyes on the ruined adobe. The mustanger had betrayed their presence and now all escape certainly was cut off.

Pry's cracked voice bloomed out into song:

"Aie! Adios mi chapparito,
No llores por tu pancho,
Que si se ve del rancho,
Muy pronto volvera."

The accent was perfect. The plaintive note of the true Mexican singer rose and fell so mournfully that Hod himself was startled into thinking for a flash that there was indeed another in the room.

Pry's bony hand closed over Hod's arm and jerked him back into the gloom. The old man snatched the belled sombrero, fell to the ground in front of the doorway as if about to have a fit, kicked off his boots and curled up in plain view with the big hat covering his face and head.

"Folks is livin' there," opined McArdle. "Better not break in on 'em, Callen. The sheriff has to depend on Mex votes for election and he don't figure on rilin' 'em none. You do one a injury and the others will remember it."

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Callen rode closer. The others followed, Deputy Sheriff McArdle still protesting. They saw before them the typical doorless hovel of the low-class Mexican and a wizened-up Mex lying in characteristic attitude on the floor.

"Aie! Adios mi chapparito!"

crooned a voice inside the adobe. It supplied the deciding touch.

Callen wheeled his horse and moved slowly away. Old Pry jumped to his feet and pulled on his boots, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth and emitting that lisping, irritating, noiseless laugh which always set Hod's teeth on edge.

WITHOUT a word the old mustanger disappeared into the brush, leaving Hod to wonder what was going to happen next. A few minutes later he appeared with the gray, boosted the tenderfoot into the saddle and hurriedly headed for the cover of the chaparral. Pry carried his rifle, the only weapon that remained to them.

The way led through a heavy growth of purple sage along a cowtrail descending into Arroyo Norte. The whinny of a horse broke the stillness. Old Pry whirled the gray off the trail. A gun flashed. The explosion awakened cries and echoes.

"Rake him," yelped Pry. "I'm comin'."

At the touch of spurs the niggerheeled gray broke into a gallop. They tore through the bosque, Pry clinging to the saddle by a tie thong. Behind them they could hear guns popping and men yelling at each other, but the shots went wild.

Presently Pry called for a halt behind a sand dune. He was badly winded. "Cain't run like I uster," he admitted. "Say, we just missed a trap. Now our escape's cut off thataway. We got to hit the desert. Did you fill the water bags like I told yeh?"

Hod replied in the affirmative. Pry ordered him to ride as swiftly as he could toward a giant sahuaro, that stood outlined against the sky amid a group of distant sand dunes. The mustanger promised to follow at a slower pace on foot.

The tenderfoot put the gray to a running walk and kept up the pace in spite of the pain from his swollen ankle and the burning of the flesh wound on his arm. He had forgotten about that wound, but it began to tingle now as if it needed attention. The plain that had appeared level proved to be cut up by small creeks, arroyos and miniature gorges, all dry. One moment he was riding briskly across a field bristling with the spines of a small yucca; the next he was tearing his way through a thicket of greasewood, sage, palo verde and thorny cactus. Something moved in a snakeweed patch just to his right, Hod suddenly remembered that he was unarmed and defenseless if attacked.

A jackrabbit appeared on a dune, long ears pricked forward; then zig-zagged across the prairie at incredible speed to halt again a hundred yards away and regard the nocturnal rider curiously. A coyote howled. Another answered. The gray snorted and shied at something in the brush. Hod could not see anything, but he heard a heavy body crash through the undergrowth.

OCCASIONALLY, by looking back he could see a luminous area that told him of the location of Jamarillo; twice he got lost and had to ride to the top of a small ridge and search the country for the six-fingered sahuaro that Old Pry had given him for a landmark. An hour passed. He seemed no nearer to the sahuaro than when he started. Again the visibility of the clear desert air had deceived him into thinking that his objective was much closer than in reality.

At last he reached it and picked a spot in the shelter of a sand dune for a camp. He stripped sweaty gear from the gray, let the mustang have a good roll and picketed the animal out before he gave attention to his own predicament. He tried to pull off his boot, but could not. He finally decided to wait until Pry arrived to attend to that and dressed the flesh wound on his arm with alcohol that the mustanger carried in his saddle bags.

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As he had no clean rags he left the cut uncovered.

The air grew colder. The tenderfoot began to shiver. He tried stirring about to keep warm but turned faint at the pain in his ankle and gave up that idea. When he went to get a drink he found the water bag wet, but empty. It had sprung a leak. The realization that he could not have water added to his thirst and soon made it a torture. Hungry, cold, thirsty, pain wracked, Hod Farlin suddenly realized that he was still a tenderfoot after all. He was lost completely. He was wondering what Old Pry would do under the circumstances, when a bush parted and a shaggy face and jug head popped into view. It was Pry.

He wasted no time on words. Evidently he read the suffering in Hod's face for he sat him down on a sand clump with a shove, jerked the boot off the swollen member before the tenderfoot could yell in protest and ripped away the sock.

"Cold bandages will fix this up," he said briskly. "Where's that water bottle?"

Hod held the collapsed desert bag up to view. Pry started to say something; then changed his mind. He repaired the bag with a coating of piñon pitch; then went over to a round-bellied barrel cactus and cut the top off of it. He saw that Hod was shivering and insisted on him covering up with the horse blanket. Hod refused the damp and odorous shelter. He preferred the cold.

"But can't we have a little fire?" he requested.

"No fire. Too easy seen at night. Come daylight, then we can build one. I'll have some water in a minute."

Old Pry squatted on his heels and began to whittle idly at a cats-claw branch. He seemed to have forgotten his promise to hunt for water. The fact that they were marooned out in this barren desert without food or water did not trouble him at all. He whittled and whistled softly, and from time to time he gave voice to a lisping, noiseless laugh. Finally Hod could bear it no longer.

"Hadn't we better start out to hunt for some water," he suggested. "Unless I get a cold compress for this ankle, it's likely to lay me up. A little first aid right now may save a lot of grief later."

Old Pry twisted his face upward in an ironical grimace. "Where you figger to get this yere water?" he demanded. Then, as Hod did not answer, he continued, "They's not a spring this side of Jamarillo and the cricks are all dry. Yo're in the desert now. Remember that the next time yeh start off with a leaky desert bag."

HOD heard the words with a sinking heart. Sometimes he did not understand the old buckaroo. Now it seemed that Pry was taunting him, getting revenge for his carelessness. He had never thought of the desert as dangerous before, but now he realized that it could be very deadly. Dry, prickly, harsh vegetation stretched away in every direction. The wilderness of lava flows, salt flats, volcanic rock, scrubby plants and venomous insects lay all about, silent, mysterious, repellant. The tentacles of barbed plants seemed to be reaching out to close on them. The dead silence hung like a pall. Even the burning sun was better than this, though it would dry lips and throat and add to the torture of thirst.

Pry lighted a cigarette, rose creakingly and taking the repaired water bag, went over to the barrel cactus he had mutilated. He dipped the desert bag into it. Hod saw it come up wet and dripping. In another moment Pry was plastering mud around the swollen ankle and tying it in place with strips from the tail of his shirt.

"Remember that, the next time yo're lost in the desert," he advised dryly. "If you cut out the center of a bar'l cactus, the bowl will fill up with water. Drink it. It ain't bad. Kind of rancid, but you'll git used to it. The desert's a right friendly old cuss if you git on speakin' terms with her."

Hod drank hastily. He was not so thirsty after all, now that he had it.

The cold became more intense. The stars began to recede. Shadowy trees and bushes assumed clearer shapes. Night-prowling varmints sneaked into hiding. The miracle of day was at hand. The myriad whisperings of the dark died away, a bird burst into song, insects and bees

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awoke and set the brush to buzzing with their activity.

Old Pry made a fire in the bottom of the wash and they hovered over it, rubbing the cold cramps out of blue fingers.

"What can we do now?" asked Hod. He had no suggestions of his own. It seemed to him that their situation was more than desperate. Though the old mustanger could find water stored up in desert cactus, he could hardly provide food in the same way. The tenderfoot knew enough to realize that they dare not try to move about in the daytime for fear of detection. Moving objects could be seen for long distances. His ankle was in such a shape that he could not ride, and yet if they remained here they must go hungry.

"Reckon' we'll camp right here," said Pry carelessly. "Pears to be as good a place as any. We're right comfortable." He went on whittling, squatting by the fire. The cats-claw pole took shape. It was a crutch. By using it Hod was able to stand up and move about.

Pry took the rifle and went to the top of the dune. He lay sprawled in the sand concealed by yucca bayonets, scrutinizing the country all around them. Vivid red and orange fingers of flame rose over the eastern crests of the mountains, changing the first gray of dawn to blood red. The clammy fingers of night released their grip on the earth. Hod drew back from the fire; then sought shade.

The change from intense cold to shimmering, blinding heat came with startling abruptness. In every direction the earth began to vibrate with heat waves. Lizards popped jerkily from rock to bush. Hod Farlin lay back languidly in the shade of a tree-lily, smoked cigarettes and reflected on how hungry he was.

Pry came back from the lookout point.

"Thought I mought be able to sneak into town and git us some grub," he said, "but they's no chance. Several parties is out lookin' for us. Guess old Mother Desert will have to pervide our breakfast. The she-hellion shore has fed me many a time."

Pry disappeared into a rank thicket of prickly pear. Hod, watching for him, saw him reappear at another spot, his arms full of tuna, yellow cylindrical yucca fruits and some big, gourd-shaped amoles.

"Just set yore teeth in this amole," ordered Pry. "It tastes like banana. And when I get me a mescsal pit goin' in a minute, yo're going to have some of the finest baked squash you ever et."

Chapter VII

"String him up!"

IT WAS night of the second day of their stay in the desert. Hod's ankle was much better, but he was still unable to walk on it. During the early evening they had moved to a more secure position on the edge of a ravine, where they could take refuge in case of pursuit. A diet of saccharine maguey, mesquite beans and cactus water had palled on both men and they watched the deepening gloom with considerable eagerness.

With a small stone Hod pounded up amole root, using an outcrop of country rock for a table. Taking a double handful of the crushed pulp, the tenderfoot moistened it and rubbed it into a lather on his face. This he washed off with clear water and combed his hair with his fingers.

"Yore a dude sure enough," jibed Tom Pry. "A regular heart breaker. Good thing I ain't no female or I'd bust right out cryin' over yeh."

"I feel better, anyway," replied Hod. "You ready to go now?"

Old Pry levered his rifle mechanism partly open, saw that a cartridge was in the chamber, put the weapon at half cock and turned toward the nigger-heeled gray which stood saddled nearby. They had decided that Pry would make an attempt to get their cached grub and, by some hook or crook, a horse and a six-shooter for the tenderfoot. Just how the old mustanger could accomplish this latter purpose would depend upon circumstances. If all was quiet at the horse corral, he planned to take the short-coupled dun from the trader who had tricked Hod

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Farlin and try to pick up a saddle at the same place. To get the six-shooter he opined that he would probably have to hold somebody up with his rifle.

"How you goin' to be while I'm gone?" demanded the old mustanger, as he swung into the saddle.

"I am very comfortable," replied Hod.

"But what kind of devilment is there for to amoose yeh? Yo're goin' to be plumb lonely without no hotels to bust into an' nobody to pick a rumpus with. If I come back and find you've killed any of them Gilo woodpeckers, remember you cain't plead self-defense."

"I won't move," said Hod fervently. "If you get me out of this fix, you can boss the job from now on."

Old Pry cocked his head on one side and regarded Hod judicially while he bit off a man-size chew. Presently he appeared to be satisfied, for a grin cracked his homely face and he said, "I don't see how you can come to no harm here. They's nothin' for you to butt into 'cept them rocks, yore langwidge ain't liable to rile the tarantlers and you cain't start no ruckus cause yeh ain't heeled. The only deadly weapon you got is them box of matches and I'd take that away if yeh didn't need 'em for cigareets and for makin' yoreself a fire down in the bed of that wash. Remember when you make that fire, use the driest wood."

"Don't take any chances, Tom," said Hod Farlin earnestly.

BUT the old buckaroo was gone and Hod found himself feeling strangely lonely. In the few weeks that he had been with Tom Pry he had become greatly attached to him, despite the stinging quality of the desert-rat's harangues. Little by little Hod had come to realize that he was indeed a tenderfoot. After he had conquered a bucking bronco, had engaged in his first fight and had learned to use a six-shooter, he had imagined that he was a complete edition of that vague entity called a Westerner. Then came the disillusionment. It was amazing the things he did not know about trail lore and woodcraft and the methods of Western gunmen. That he had learned them without injury in this hairtrigger country was entirely due to the fact that Old Pry had protected him.

With the aid of the crutch he went about gathering ocotillo faggots, secured some driftwood and dropped down into the arroyo to make a fire, where it would be out of sight, as Pry had ordered. He selected a spot near the base of a giant sahuaro for his fire because the great Corinthian column of thorn-studded growth seemed like company. Hod never ceased to marvel at the wonder of this massive, awe-inspiring creation, which rose out of the barren desert fifty feet into the air, forming a base for half a dozen outbranching spatulate fingers grouped like the holders of a candlestick. Covered with sharp, oily spines from top to bottom, its trunk riddled with holes made by the Gila woodpecker, the inner slatted framework giving its green covering a corduroy effect, it seemed to Hod like a great giant with a separate mentality of its own.

The fire blazed up merrily, licking toward the cactus trunk. Hod chuckled with content. There was something about the desert, the outdoor life, that made it impossible to take discomfort and danger seriously.

"Old Pry was right," said Hod to himself. "I certainly can't get in any trouble here."

A crackling, spitting, popping sound brought him to his feet. Flames were leaping up the fat, round cactus trunk, lighting the sky with sparks and darting golden tongues. The sound became louder as the burning, sizzling, resinous thorns, whipped by a rising wind, enveloped the whole structure in a flickering mantle of shimmering orange.

Hod stared at the fire, dumfounded. He remembered, now, hearing prospectors and cowboys speak of the "Arizona candle," whose highly inflammable thorns were often used for signalling or for spectacular purposes. This was one of them. Only the horns would burn, of course, but that was enough to make a finger of fire, pointing to his hiding place. When Pry had left him, he had but one chance in a thousand of playing the fool and he had hopped on that one chance. The blaze

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could be seen for miles around. Of course a posse would ride out to learn what caused it and they would find Hodcomb Farlin, tenderfoot.

Hod could imagine what Old Tom Pry must be saying as he watched the blazing cactus. If Pry reached him first, he might escape, but would it be worth the price of the verbal trimming he would receive. Otherwise, there was small hope of fight, crippled as he was.

Miserably he gathered up the few things left in camp and hobbled toward the arroyo. A rocky barrier stopped him at the very entrance and he had to get down on his hands and knees to drag himself along by catching at the roots and limbs of trees. Once over this barrier he dropped into a slot so narrow that he could not use his crutch. At the end of this slot a matted mass of prickly bush made an upward climb necessary. As he lay flat on his stomach pushing with his crutch against a rock and trying to drag his body upward with the other hand, a shout broke on his ears. The clatter of galloping horses, loud laughter and then a command rang out.

"Scatter, you fellers. He can't be far away. He's got only one hoss."

Hod lay perfectly quiet. He heard men and horses moving in all directions about him. A trickle of gravel rolled down in his face. He looked up and into a bearded, grinning countenance.

"Wal, dad blame me!" exclaimed the man, poking his six-shooter almost in Hod's face. "Playin' possum, eh? Well, come out o' that and come fast."

"I can't," said Hod. "I'm not armed. My leg's crippled.

Other faces appeared beside that of the discoverer. One was that of Skinner Roslin. In another moment Hod Farlin was standing among his captors, limping on one foot, his crutch gone.

"It's the tenderfoot, sheriff," said Skinner, addressing the short, bearded man. "He lit that Arizona candle by mistake."

THE horseman stared at Hod in amazement. At first gasp they found it impossible to believe that anyone would be so green as to do such a thing. Then as Hod's lugubrious countenance verified Skinner's statement, a roar of laughter burst forth, and the place echoed with guffaws.

"It's a shame to take him," said Sheriff Shorty Johnson, grinning all over his face. "If he claims we didn't play fair, I got to turn him loose. Looky here what he carried in his pocket. Soap plant root to keep himself sweet and pure with."

Again a gust of mirth shook the broad-hatted men. Hod Farlin, his cheeks burning, held his head defiantly erect and scrutinized his captors. The necessity for hopping on one leg detracted from his dignity, but he did the best he could. Skinner was the only member of Callen's gang present. That explained why he had offered no violence. Skinner's colorless eyes never left Hod's face and the tenderfoot did not need to note the upcurling of the gunman's lip to read the threat there.

"Somebody ought to look around for the little old runt," said Skinner. "He got away."

"Old Pry wasn't here," retorted Shorty. "He's trail-wise. He'd never send out no signal fires like that. Say Skinner, you must of made some mistake. You mean to claim that this yere brick-topped tenderfoot beat you to the draw?" He finished searching Hod and replaced the Spanish bayonet roots which the tenderfoot carried for soap.

It was Skinner's turn to writhe and he did so ungracefully.

"That was a trick," growled Skinner. "He had a gat hid in his other hand. He made a pass with his right and stuck a left-hand gat right into my snoot."

A third hearty outburst of laughter greeted Skinner's talk of woe, and the members of the posse regarded Hod with a shade more respect as they mounted him on a rangy mustang. They ragged Skinner unmercifully as he continued his story of the tenderfoot's alleged depredations

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and Roslin had reached a boiling point by the time they entered Jamarillo. On the outskirts he left the group. The act made Hod feel uneasy. It would be just like Skinner to gather Callen's gang and try to kill him before he could be brought to trial.

IN ORDER not to attract a crowd, Shorty Johnson dismissed all but two members of the posse before they reached the main street and instructed them not to spread the news. Then the prisoner was spirited swiftly to the rear of the masonry structure, jerked off the horse and shunted into the sheriff's office. The undersheriff, sitting on a high stool by a desk going over some books, surlily entered Hod's name and the charge against him without looking up.

Shorty ushered the tenderfoot into a private cubbyhole and closed the door. Then he dropped into a swivel chair at his desk, lighted a cigar and motioned for Hod to take a seat. Shorty was as different from McArdle, his Wild Cat deputy, as day from night. The tenderfoot liked him at once. He had kindly brown eyes and his face constantly threatened to break into a broad grin. The smile wrinkles about his eyes had become permanent. Neatly trimmed brown whiskers failed to conceal a firm, strong mouth and outthrust jaw; and his rope-burned, calloused hands told the tale of many a round-up on the open range.

He swung around and fixed Hod with a humorous glance. For a full minute he did not say a word, but merely took in all the detail of his bristly, fiery-haired prisoner; the unshaved cheeks, pain-wracked features, the remnants of shirt and trousers torn and ripped by thorns and brush. His eyes lighted up.

"Tender or tough?" he demanded. "Which is it, son?"

"Both," said Hod, biting off the word.

"So they say," drawled Shorty, stroking his chin. "So they say. I've read in story books about fellers like you, but I've never seen 'em too leather-necked for a Manila rope."

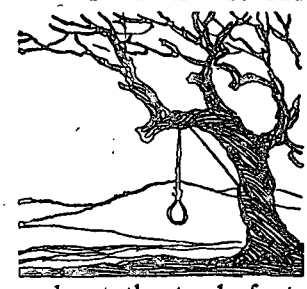
Hod leaned forward, his heart beating faster. The sinister significance of the words sent a little chill through him.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You know what I mean," replied Shorty dryly. He jerked a scarred thumb toward the window. "Out there they's a fellow making a hondoo. It's not a regular one, but extry strong with two folds and thirteen wraps for good luck."

"Well, what of it?"

"That's a hangman's noose!"



Hod Farlin rose suddenly to his feet, every nerve atingle, oblivious of the pain in his injured ankle. Had he heard rightly? The threat in the sheriff's words seemed incredible, unreal, and yet the tenderfoot knew that it was real. Shorty Johnson was not joking. His brown eyes were hard; his face unsmiling. Never in his wildest imagination had Hod ever dreamed of hanging. He had faced flaming guns without fear, but the mere thought of a rope trailing about his neck like some slimy snake, choking off his wind, sent a shudder through him.

Only for a moment did he give way to his emotions; then abruptly he sat down again and regarded the sheriff narrowly.

"Lynch law!" he said crisply. "Is that your brand of justice?"

"It's good medicine for sneaks that shoot old men from ambush," retorted Shorty, a trace of aversion creeping into his tone. "That was dirty work, Farlin."

Hod waited a moment before replying. Then he leaned toward Shorty and looked him squarely in the eye.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he rapped out.

"Oh, yo're slick-tongued, Farlin," the sheriff admitted. "I heered tell you was a gabby gent. But you cain't crawl out of this. You was seen makin' a getaway, after you killed old John Sanborn."

Hod sat perfectly still, every movement suspended, not even breathing. Sharply etched in his mind's eye he got a picture of Sanborn lying by his campfire with a hole through his forehead, his wife's picture grasped in his mind. The cold metallic

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touch of that tintype against his skin under his shirt made the recollection more vivid. Someone had seen him and Pry. They had made a great mistake in not notifying the authorities in the first place. It had been a foolhardy, daredevil idea to take vengeance into their own hands, and now they were reaping the whirlwind. Hod had expected to be charged with his offenses against Callen and his men and he had anticipated little trouble in proving that Callen's outfit had been the aggressor. With an honest sheriff in charge of the investigation he could have produced witnesses from Wild Cat to show that he had been attacked, that he had killed Callen's cowboy in self-defense, that he had stolen the Anchor C claybank only after they had shot his own mount and that he had clouted Callen over the head to save Tom Pry's life.

THIS charge of the Sanborn murder came out of a clear sky. He did not know what to do or say. When they searched him thoroughly, which they would do, they would find that tintype. Someone would identify it as Sanborn's property. He probably had shown it to other people in an effort to locate his daughter. This would be taken as conclusive proof that he killed the old man. He realized that the sheriff was regarding him with growing suspicion, yet he could not make up his mind whether to tell the truth or hold back his testimony for the trial.

"If you got anything to say you better talk fast," advised Shorty. "I'm here to uphold the law, but I ain't going to let them rannies perforate my hide to save no yeller-bellied murderer. Here they come now."

A revolver shot rang out. It was followed by loud yells, the firing of guns, the drumming of horses' hoofs on the roadway. As the mob came closer and closer Hod could make out the words above the hubbub of clamorous voices and he recognized Pete Callen's harsh tones.

"String him up!" "Break down the doors!" "Hang the murderer!"

"I'll talk," said Hod Farlin.

Chapter VIII

MOB LAW

SOMEONE began pounding on the outer door of the jail. Shorty Johnson stepped from his private cubbyhole into the main office. Hod followed on his heels. The under sheriff had gone. The office was deserted. Faces appeared at the barred window. Those outside saw Hod and a wild yell went up.

"What do you fellows want?" bellowed Shorty Johnson.

A bedlam of voices rendered their words unintelligible. Hod could hear Callen roughly commanding silence. It was he that answered.

"We want that killer, Shorty," said Pete. "He's guilty and you know it."

"He's making a statement," replied the sheriff. "I want to hear what he has to say."

"That ain't necessary," retorted Callen roughly. "You cain't believe a word he says. He's an awful liar."

"Don't you try to tell me my business," snorted Shorty angrily. "You fellers git away from that door."

Something smashed against the heavy panel. "Bust it down," yelped a voice and the others took it up. "Break down the door." The sheriff stepped close to the door. Hod saw he was going to open it and started to utter a word of protest, but stopped when he saw Shorty hitch his gun forward, ready for instant use.

"Clear away from that door," rapped out Shorty. "I'm going to open it. I want to talk to you mavericks."

There was a sound of grumbling, of shuffling feet, of voices raised in argument. The crowd retired slightly. Shorty put out the lamp, plunging the jail into darkness. Then he pulled the door open and stepped through the opening to confront the mob squarely. One glance told him that while Callen was the leader, the bulk of the crowd was composed of his own friends and acquaintances. It was these he addressed.

"You men that know me savvy that I'm square and that I'm going to do my duty," he began. "You put me in here to enforce the law. Now do you think you

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are helping me any when you want to take a prisoner out of my hands before I get a chance to make him come clean?"

"He's a liar," yipped Skinner Roslin. "And he's pretty slick, too. What good will a statement do when you cain't believe a word he says?"

"Are you runnin' the sheriff's office or am I?" demanded Shorty. "I see a lot of men here who voted for me. Did you aim that Skinner Roslin should be a sheriff, or me?"

A murmur rose from the rear of the growing mob. "That's right." "The sheriff is talkin' sense." "Go on, Shorty, say yore speech!"

"I got no speech," pursued the sheriff. "I told you already that the prisoner is making a statement. And I'm tellin' you, not askin', that you disperse and go about yore business."

Several men pushed forward. Hod, looking past the sheriff, saw Callen and Skinner among them. Shorty's right hand dropped to his side, a few inches above his gun. A hand in the crowd came up. Moonlight glinted on a gun barrel. Shorty's own weapon popped out of the holster.

"I see some strangers here that's honin' for trouble," snarled the sheriff. "I don't want to have to shoot for fear of hittin' some of my friends, but if you don't git out o' here I'll salivate the feller that just flashed his iron."

Men began pushing up from the rear. The sheriff's friends roughly demanded that Callen and his outfit withdraw. Shorty holstered his gun and re-entered the jail. He lighted the lamp as if nothing had happened, motioned Hod to a seat and indicated his readiness to listen.

"I admit it looks black for me, Sheriff," said Hod, "but if I'm given time, I can prove my innocence."

"God only knows how much time you got," said Shorty, "so you better do your provin' fast."

"This trouble started near Wild Cat," continued the tenderfoot. "I came upon a dying cowpuncher. He was with Sidney's outfit. Skinner said that he killed this man in a fair fight. I got a dying statement from that man. It was a warning that Helena Masters was in danger. Sidney himself was there and can verify what I say, though I'm not so sure about him——"

"Leave Giff Sidney out of it," said the sheriff coldly. "I know he's square."

"I found that Callen and Skinner were trying to swindle Helena and I warned her. Malott, her brother-in-law, who appears to be in with the gang, told them and my troubles started. They tried to run me out of town, convict me as a rustler and they even tried to kill me. In fighting back I did a little rough work myself."

SHORTY laughed abruptly. "I like that. A *little* rough work! You shot up a crew of punchers, didn't you? And you stuck up Callen, Skinner and my deputy and throwed them in jail, killed a Callen gunman and busted Callen's skull open! You call that a little?"

"It was all done in self defense."

"Did you steal that claybank in self-defense?"

"Both that and in reprisal. They killed my horse. I had to make a getaway. As it was, I rode into Arroyo Jamarillo with them dusting our fetlocks."

"Get down to business. What happened next?"

"As we entered Jamarillo town we met Sanborn."

"So you admit meeting him! Now yo're getting down to business. What did you do?"

"Sanborn told us he was looking for a party. He showed us her picture, a tintype. It was his daughter. He said she had been betrayed by a man named Travers. He was hunting Travers."

Hod saw the sheriff's eyes widen and he knew he had made an impression. He hurried on, eager to consolidate his gains, speaking in low, convincing tones, never taking his eyes off Shorty Johnson's. He

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told of their hunt for Travers, of the warning given them by the Welcome Home dancer not to ask for Jessie Sanborn and of returning to Sanborn's camp to find him dead.

The sheriff got to his feet abruptly.

"They told me you was slick-tongued, but they didn't say half of it," admitted Shorty crisply. "That shore is a purty fairy tale, but they's one thing you forgot."

"What do you mean?" asked Hod, with a sinking heart.

"A innocent man, finding a feller murdered, would of notified me at once."

Full realization of the utter folly of their conduct dawned on the tenderfoot. In their eagerness to avenge personally the death of Sanborn, they had pursued an absurd and dangerous course which now threatened to put Hod's neck in a noose. No amount of argument moved Shorty Johnson. Hod told of their search for Travers, of the black mustang deal, of the holdup in the alley when a city crook pulled the old hat trick on him, of the shooting at the hotel and the loss of his mustang and saddle—leaving all mention of Helena out of it—and of their flight to the desert. Shorty listened politely, but his icy look never changed. He could not see anything incriminating in Callen, Skinner, McArdle and Malott playing poker with Travers in a hotel room. He said he would ask McArdle about it, but it was plain he put no stock in the clue. Neither did he believe the story about Travers.

AT LAST Hod fell silent. He saw his words had no effect. One more card lay in his hands but he hesitated to deal it out. The tintype concealed under his shirt might convince Shorty of the truth of his story concerning Sanborn. Then, again, it might be held as incriminating evidence. At any rate, Hod was not ready to give it up just yet.

Outside everything had quieted down. The usual sounds of hilarity came from saloon and honky-tonk joint, but there was no shooting and no mob yelling. This comparative silence seemed more deadly, more sinister to Hod than the noise. He knew his enemies too well to think that they had quit. Callen would never stop until he was out of the way. The lull merely meant that the assassins were lurking in the dark.

Shorty shoved his prisoner through a door into the jail corridor and there locked him up in a barred room. He departed without a word. Hod, standing in the middle of the cell floor, heard the outer door close after the sheriff, caught the crunch of his boot in gravel, the creak of a saddle and then the sound of a horse moving away at a walk. He was not sure that the sheriff had abandoned him to his death, but it certainly looked that way. Callen would be watching for the sheriff's departure and as soon as he was out of earshot, they would come after him, Hod felt certain.

He explored the cell but found nothing to give him hope. The walls were of heavy hardwood and the iron bars of windows and doors firmly embedded. There was nothing in the place in the way of furniture except a bucket and a pile of straw covered with a tarpaulin. Hod did not even have a match now to relieve the utter blackness of the dungeon, and he had to make his discoveries in the dark.

He tried each bar, swinging his weight against it. He put his shoulder to board after board. None yielded the slightest. Presently he gave up hope of escape and turned his attention to the window. It was a very small opening, not large enough to admit the passage of his body, with glass on the outside and bars on the inside. The glass was badly shattered and begrimed with cobwebs and dirt.

Hod started to wipe it clean but did not complete the motion. If he removed the grime from the window it would tell his enemies where he was. The other cells were empty, their windows opaque. He must give his own cell also the appearance of being unoccupied.

Standing at one side of the opening,

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gazing at an angle through a small clean spot in the glass at the distant, star-filled sky, he attuned his ears to catch the first stealthy tread that would mark the approach of the expected enemy. The cold numbed him, but he did not feel it. As he waited for the inevitable conflict, a great loneliness swept over him. An owl hooted nearby. Coyotes were calling from the hills. Once he caught the almost human scream of a cougar from afar. These wild things were free, free. To Hod Farlin, penned up in the wood and iron cage, nothing seemed so desirable as freedom. The frowning mountains and bleak desert which had appeared so forbidding when he could roam them at will, now became transformed into something beautiful by contrast with the four hideous walls of his jail.

THE crackle of a broken twig froze him against the wall. Some one was moving beneath that window. He could hear the lisp of boots through sand, the creak of a leather belt, hard breathing. There was more than one man. A faint whisper reached his ears, menacing, sibilant.

Light blinded his eyes. He was staring into a torch thrust against the window of the adjacent cell. The gleam of it fell upon him through the intervening bars. Glass crashed. Jagged crystal daggers fell tinkling to the floor. The interior of the other cell leaped into plain view.

"If you see him, shoot," growled a voice. "He's the only pris'ner."

Nerveless, tense with dread, Hod crouched below the window and awaited discovery. If he moved they would see him all the quicker. He dared scarcely breathe as the torch swept over the adjoining cell room, making it light as day.

"He's not in there," growled Callen's voice. "Try the next one."

"Let me do the shooting." The shrill tones of Skinner Roslin were unmistakable. "Jerry was my best friend. His last words was, 'Get the greenhorn. It was him that shot me!'"

"I don't give a damn who shoots him, just so you put him out of the way," cut in a strange voice. "Hurry up."

The light flashed off. Hod flattened himself close to the floor immediately beneath the window. It was the spot where he would least likely be seen. He wondered at that stranger who seemed in command of this lynch party. Generally Callen took orders from no one, but in this case he did not seem to object to the fellow's peremptory tone.

The marauders were making no effort to conceal their presence now. They knew the breaking of the window had awakened the prisoner, if he were asleep and they now substituted speed for caution.

He heard them moving under his window, heard Callen cursing in a low grumble. Glass showered down on him. A path of light lay across the floor and swiftly traversed the narrow chamber. It swept this way and that like a deadly beacon, throwing into sharp relief the upright iron bars, the bucket, the straw bed covered with the tarpaulin. It touched the toe of Hod's boot and he held his breath in tense expectancy of discovery; then it flicked out and he heard them crashing the next window.

The stranger was becoming more and more impatient.

"We'll have to saw the bars," he snapped. "I thought we might, and I've brought something to soften the steel and a hacksaw. Open up the middle window. Then Skinner can stick his narrow head in and see where our friend is hiding. I'll wager he's under one of the windows close up against the wall listening to every word we say."

A saw rasped on metal. The marauders worked rapidly. At last only one bar remained between Hod Farlin and death.

CHAPTER IX

A CALF IN THE MUD

TOM PRY reined in beneath the boughs of a scrub oak and peered over the tops of the piñons at the lights of Jamarillo below him. He had ridden rapidly since leaving Hod at the sahuaro and the nigger heeled gray was badly lathered, but the little old mustanger himself seemed as cool and fresh as a cucumber.

The old buckaroo's elongated, flat-chinned face wore a peaceful expression

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and it was plain that he expected his plans to work out without a hitch now that he had escaped his hoodoo, the unfortunate, trouble-seeking tenderfoot.

It must be admitted that Hod had begun to get on the buckaroo's nerves. It had given the old man a new interest in life to adopt the helpless pilgrim at the time he came to Wild Cat and began a series of bad breaks that finally had made him a fugitive from justice. He had taught him how to mount on the proper side of a horse, how to cinch up a saddle without getting the stuffing knocked out of him, how to shoot a gun and how to care for himself on the plains under ordinary circumstances.

In justice to Hod, Old Pry had to declare that the tenderfoot rarely made the same mistake twice, but then he could find so darned many original ones that there was no need for repeating. Hod's stunt of butting in on Helena's affairs at a time when they had their own hands full to overflowing and his loss of even the black roarer had been the final climax to a series of blunders that had sent them out into the desert, foodless, without water, having only one horse between them and no ammunition or revolvers.

"Well, he shore is safe out there," chuckled the old man. "There's no way he can fly loose and bust up the dishes, and meanwhile me an' old Nigger Heel will have a nice time friskin' that hoss trader of the buckskin and a heap o' saddle.

After that I'll watch my chance, stick him or Callen's outfit up and git a shootin' iron 'er two, grab the supplies I cached and sift back to my sidekick. Reckon' he'll be plumb ready by this time to go with me to the wild mustang country and do a little bronc peelin' until his popularity kind of dies down. I shore got to take that feller where the climate fits his disposition or he'll be disposed of for the good of the climate."

Below him against the mountainside, Jamarillo had settled down to its regular week-night pastime of liquidation, both at the poker and faro layouts and at the bar. On the lightened portion of the street men appeared now and then, zig-zagged to greener pastures and parted folding doors with impatient shoulders, but on the outskirts all was quiet. No lights shone at the horse corral. There were no gunmen roaming abroad to make traveling difficult as had been the case two days previously. It looked like a cinch to old Tom Pry.

He saw a man halt at the corner near the jail and gaze fixedly across the desert. The fellow dived into a saloon to reappear a second after with a dozen other men at his heels. All followed the direction of his gaze. The sound of revolver shots came to his ears. He could see the flash of the explosions against the dark background of an adobe wall. The noise of shouting sounded plainly. Horsemen came galloping into view. The street became packed with men and women. Something had suddenly aroused Jamarillo.

A yellow glow appeared at the horse corral and he saw men stirring about there. Old Tom groaned and then cursed. Something had happened to spoil his plans again. All this excitement would make his raid difficult, if not impossible.

"Wall, they's one satisfaction," snorted Pry finally. "I know danged well the tenderfoot had nothing to do with this. He——"

He rode out on top of a knoll. Incredulously he glared at the place where he had left Hod Farlin. Fingers of flame leaped skyward from each separate sahuaro branch, filling the sky all about with an odd glow and sending up sparks that appeared like short-lived stars in meteoric flight. It was a full minute before the old buckaroo could credit his senses. The tenderfoot had set fire to the big cactus. In his blundering way he had made his fire too close to the base of the great plant and had converted it into a blazing candle, pointing out his location as surely as if he himself were shouting it to the world.

"Hells bells!" gasped old Tom. "I might a knowed it. Git out o' here Nigger Heel.

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You and me has got a calf to pull out of the mud again."

SEETHING with impatient, foaming anger, Tom Pry rode toward Hod's hiding place, urged on by the realization that the tenderfoot was in great danger of being shot on the spot if Callen's men happened to find him. To make time, he had to leave cover and expose himself to the other riders. A bullet dusting up the gravel in front of him told him his identity was discovered before the report of the gun reached him. He flung a shot at two horsemen who had turned toward him and had the satisfaction of seeing them duck for cover.

But his satisfaction was short lived. Other men appeared, Gun flashes dotted the sage. Bullets began to whistle through the leaves and limbs. Old Pry turned into a gully and tried to reach Hod in that way, but the instant his horse's head rose over the rim, a bullet lost its steel jacket on a boulder and cut through the leather of his boots. They knew which way he was going and they had headed him off.

There was nothing to do but retreat. Old Tom came to a place where the brush grew thick down to the gulch. Here he dismounted, crept to a position that commanded the surrounding area, and watched for his pursuers.

The top of a Spanish bayonet moved. Pry placed a shot that buzzed off a rock into the prickly foliage. The sharpshooter, hiding there, jumped down the slope behind him with a great clatter of rolling rocks. Pry whipped the gray up the opposite side of the gulch and into the bosque just as a revolver began to sputter. He realized that he could not reach Hod now, before the others, and he headed back toward Jamarillo through mountains that were almost impassable. At places he had to dismount and lead Nigger Heel. At others he was forced to retrace his steps and take another route.

When again he looked down on Jamarillo he saw torches flashing here and there in the street and a large crowd gathered around the jail. He needed no one to tell him what had happened. Hod had been caught and he was in that jail.

For a moment the old buckaroo experienced a feeling of relief. At any rate the boy had not been shot down. That meant that Shorty Johnson, the sheriff, had been with the capturing party and that Hod would get a square deal. But the old man's optimism did not last when he remembered that McArdle, one of Shorty's deputies, was a member of Callen's gang and that Callen might make opportunity to get the prisoner in spite of Shorty.

LIGHTS were shining in every home, men were hustling about the hoss corral and on all sides there was an air of alertness that made approach to the place doubly dangerous. Everyone knew the description of Pry and his gray horse. If he rode in closer he would be seen and all chances of aiding Hod destroyed. On the other hand the old buckaroo realized the absolute necessity for mingling with the crowd in order to learn what the mob planned to do. Hiding here in the brush a mile from the jail would be fruitless.

Picketing the horse in a dense thicket, he made his way downward on foot, through thorn patches that tore at his clothes and flesh, and into a meadow of purple sage that was dotted with the glow of campfires. Ahead of him loomed a tented wagon. A dog began to bark savagely. A woman's voice challenged him sharply and a man answered from an adjoining camp, "What's the matter over there?"

Old Pry slipped swiftly by, stooping to keep his head below the bush-tops, rifle ready for instant use. A flat-topped adobe stood to the left. Old Pry dropped close to the ground. A small Mexican, poke-crowned hat on his head and a serape thrown over his shoulders, came out of the inner gloom, lighted a cigarette, stared about him and started uptown. The old buckaroo had a sudden impulse to get an effective disguise from this night prowler, but instantly discarded

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the idea as too dangerous. The man would cry out or someone in the jacal, watching after him, would give the warning. He would have to take the chances undisguised.

Pry circled the jail at a distance of a hundred yards. The crowd about the front of the jail had increased and the old man could distinguish the threatening words as they yelled: "Hang him! Break down the door! String him up!"

Like a dog that suddenly catches a strong scent, the old buckaroo turned and angled toward the jail, increasing his pace to a trot and then to a run. Now was the time to act if at all. To his ears came the sound of loud pounding on the jail door and the shouts of the mob demanding admittance. Unless he caught them before they broke down that door, his efforts would be fruitless. Once inside the jail they could kill the tenderfoot in spite of the buckaroo's rifle.

Old Pry was running upright now in plain view. In the excitement no one noticed him. Every eye was fixed on the entrance to the jail. Six men came into view carrying a heavy battering ram. A cry of triumph split the air. "Break down the door!" yelled the crowd. "Get that murderer!"

Lights went out in the jail. Pry heard the sheriff's voice commanding the raiders to stand away; that he was going to open the door; and he halted a hundred feet short of the growling mob, his rifle pointing straight at them, hammer cocked. From his position behind a mesquite tree he could sweep the crowd at an oblique angle.

The sheriff appeared in the doorway. Shorty Johnson's bearded face, outlined in the moonlight, was devoid of fear. Instead of the abject surrender Pry had expected, he heard Shorty defy the gangsters, saw him suddenly whip out his revolver and he leveled his own rifle at the leaders in the moment of suspense that followed.

Under pressure from Shorty's friends, the crowd fell back. Pry retreated also to a safer place in a nest of boulders. His mind was troubled with what he had heard the sheriff say. He was going to make the tenderfoot give out a statement. Evidently he had exacted a promise from Hod that he would confess in exchange for protection against the lawless lynchers. This worried Old Pry. It would be just like Hod Farlin to say the wrong thing. He might get himself in so deep that he could not escape the penitentiary.

CROUCHING there among the rocks, his mind concentrated on these worries, watching the jail out of the corner of his eyes, sniper fashion, the tired, little old man dozed off.

He awoke suddenly with the crash of broken glass sounding in his ears. Shadowy forms were crouching against the masonry walls of the jail. A torch flamed. The marauders were flashing it into one of the cells.

Old Pry was on his feet in an instant, creeping forward again, running silently where he struck an open space. He did not have to be told the meaning of those lurking figures. Stopped by the sheriff from lynching the tenderfoot, these men had come here in the night to assassinate him.

CHAPTER X

SIX-SHOOTERS TALK

A HUMAN being crouched like a wild animal at bay beneath a barred window in a dungeon-like cell, body gently heaving under stress of restrained breathing, hands knotted into fists, eyes wide and gleaming like those of a cat in the dark, head thrust forward, jaw protruding. The rasp of a file on steel bit into his very nerves. The harsh voice of Pete Callen grated in his ears, and at intervals the cold, metallic, heartless tones of the stranger became audible.

"You take a turn," grumbled Skinner Roslin. "This is hard work. Here, Pete, take a holt."

Pete took up the hacksaw and the rasping noise resumed. The lynchers were on the last bar of the window. When it was cut through they could look in and see Bud. It would require but a minute to shoot him down.

"Almost through," grunted Pete Callen.

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"Heave on it. Mebby you can bust it out."

Hod set himself to cry out. He had held it in as long as possible, pride forbidding a yell of fear, but now he cast aside all pride and filled his lungs for a shriek that would bring the sheriff and others to the scene.

He saw fingers clasping the steel bar, heard the creaking of the window frame as pressure was applied and——

A bullet thudded against the masonry walls and went shrieking off into the night. The crack of a rifle rolled back in echoes from the rock precipices. Callen's shouted curse, the clump of feet in sand and excited cries from saloon and gambling dens told Hod that he had been saved. He heaved a great sigh and slumped heavily against the window, one hand clutching at the battered bar, eyes probing the desert bush.

A great feeling of relief swept over him; then was succeeded by one of joy when he detected another sound. It was a strange sound to come out of the desert bush; shrill chortling, followed by an irritating cackling laugh, the broken, senile gurglings of an old man, Tom Pry. Hod felt like whooping for joy. Once again the aged mustanger had pulled his acorns from the fire.

A jail door slammed. Heels beat upon the floor. Some one had entered the jail and was coming toward Hod's cell. The tenderfoot heard a key rasping in the lock of the partition door. Was it possible that Callen and his men were attacking from two points at once and that one party had succeeded in making entry by the front way?

Hod made no effort to conceal himself this time. It would be useless, and he was not going to be killed crouching in a corner like a rat. He stood out in the middle of the floor facing the cell door, waiting for what must come next. The lock clicked open. The door swung ajar and a path of light bathed the bars of the right-hand cell. The illumination came from a light in the sheriff's office.

"What's the matter here?" rapped out a voice that Hod recognized as that of Deputy Sheriff McArdle.

He held silent, swept by a new dread. Of course Callen had used McArdle to gain entrance. Why hadn't he thought of that possibility before?

The door creaked on its hinges; opened wide. A tall corpulent figure stood outlined in plain view, a six-shooter in extended hand. It was McArdle.

"What's going on here?" he snarled. "No funny business now, I've got yeh covered."

"Save your breath, McArdle," replied Hod. "There's no one here to hear your phony speech, and you are not fooling me a bit."

McArdle touched a match to the corridor lamp; then came close to Hod's cell, naked gun still held in his right hand.

"Gabby as ever!" sneered the Wild Cat deputy. "Every time you open yore mouth some new fool idee is born. Here yeh are so scared you talk like you had yore mouth full of cotton, and still you got breath enough to rag a feller that's come to pertect yeh."

Hod did not answer at once. He studied McArdle through the bars and wondered why the deputy was waiting. Could it be that Callen or Skinner were coming to get the personal satisfaction of killing him? More likely that would be Callen, wanting to get revenge for the clout on the head Hod had given him.

Hope flamed as he thought of Old Tom Pry in the offing and died quickly when he remembered that the mustanger could fight only from cover. If Pry appeared at the jail he would be captured or shot down. He could not help but wonder what Pry was doing, just the same, and whether the old fellow would perform another miracle at the last moment.

From the sheriff's office sounded another voice, that of Shorty Johnson, and Hod realized why McArdle had not shot him. The squat sheriff came to McArdle's side and demanded to know what had happened. Hod explained, omitting to mention that it must have been Old Pry who fired the shot.

Shorty scratched his head. "I don't get

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this, a'tall," he admitted. "'Peers to me this gang is all-fired anxious to git you out of the way, Tenderfoot. Mebby they's something to yore story, anyhow. McArdle, you git a posse and comb the town for Callen and Travers. Send four, five men out yonder to find Tom Pry, too. It was him that fired that shot. I'm going to stay right here and guard my pris'ner."

MORNING came cold and gray. Sleepy-eyed gamblers went to their beds to sleep all day. The streets were deserted. Over the crest of the hills peeped the sun. The air became warmer and presently the cell that had been so frigid a few hours before became hot.

McArdle came in with Hod's breakfast on a tray; coffee, dry bread, beans. The tenderfoot drank the coffee and left the rest. He heard Shorty and McArdle arguing about whether to handcuff him. Shorty did not believe handcuffs were necessary. The hostile crowd that had begun to gather again was sufficient protection against escape. The prisoner knew that if he made a break he would be filled full of lead before he could go a hundred feet.

"You better leave the jail by the back door," insisted McArdle. "That way you can git him to the courtroom before the crowd knows what's come off."

"They can't bluff me," retorted Shorty. "I'm relyin' on my friends to stop all trouble and I won't sneak out the back way. I'd never hear the last of it. When we walk out of here with this tenderfoot, it will be plumb through the front door. I'll have my gun ready and I'll use it on any ranny that crowds me too far."

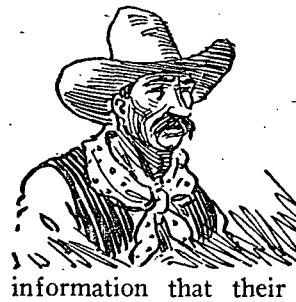
The sheriff asked Hod if he wanted to shave before appearing in court for his preliminary hearing. Hod refused roughly. Shorty took him from his cell and out into the office. The surly undersheriff, who had refused to notice him, was at the desk again, working at his books. He did not give the prisoner so much as a glance. Ned Goeler was a dyspeptic and he took his grouch out on mankind.

THROUGH the barred windows Hod saw faces and heard a yell go up as the crowd caught a glimpse of him. Outside some one had raised the cry of "lynch him." McArdle had gone. He was alone now in the office with the sheriff and the dyspeptic under-sheriff.

"Sit down here and wait a minute," commanded Shorty. "I'll tell them birds out there a thing or two."

Sheriff Johnson went out of the front door and closed it behind him. Hod heard the cries that greeted Shorty and then he became absorbed in a plan that had begun to formulate in his mind. Noiselessly he rose to his feet and strode toward the under-sheriff. Through a window he could see the rear of the jail yard, a corral containing a few horses, a shed and a hitch-rack to which was tied a big bay saddler. Horsemen came into view riding toward the front of the jail. They had been stationed out there in the brush. Hod understood now why McArdle had wanted the sheriff to take him out the back way. Callen and his gunmen were hidden there. Now McArdle had conveyed word to them that the prisoner was to be taken out the front way and they were all flocking to the main entrance.

All this flashed through Hod's mind in a moment. It convinced him that if he went out of this place to the courtroom with the sheriff, he would never live to return and it strengthened his resolution to start fighting. If he could escape past the under-sheriff and through that back door, he might hop that big bay and have a running chance to escape. All of Callen's men had moved to the front of the jail by this time, convinced by McArdle's information that their victim would be brought out there.



Hod stalked toward the rear door, trying to appear unconcerned. His hand was on the knob.

"Hey there!"

The under-sheriff's irritable voice brought him around standing. Bloodshot eyes peered at him out of a crabby old

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face. He saw that the under-sheriff carried no weapons but that a blue steel gun lay in a drawer near his hand.

"Well!" trumpeted the aged misanthrope. "What the hell do you want?" There was no recognition in the fellow's eyes. He was seeing Hod for the first time and he did not know him from Adam.

"I don't want anything," replied the tenderfoot mildly.

"Huh!" snorted the under-sheriff. "Don't want nothin', eh? Well, who are yeh lookin' for?"

"Nobody."

The under-sheriff's face broke into an angry scowl. "Then get the hell out of here the way you came." His thumb twitched toward the rear door and he turned back to his books.

Unable to realize the miracle that had happened, Hod paused for a precious second before he flung open the door and leaped out of it straight toward the tethered horse.

A voice called to him from overhead. Looking up he saw Old Tom Pry on the jail roof. The old man swung down nimbly and together they raced for the bay mustang.

"Grab the bronc," commanded Pry. "Mine's hid over yonder."

Hod jerked loose the tie rope and turned to mount. A face appeared above the saddle and after it a gun. A man had been concealed on the other side of the mustang. Hod heard a voice say, "Get 'em up," and in that moment his mind worked like lightning. Striking the bay sharply he dropped behind its barrel and at the same time thrust his shoulder hard against its side.

The horse whirled away from the blow and the pressure, knocking the gunman off his feet. Hod started to mount, but a shot from the sprawling man caused him to drop back to the ground again. Old Pry was running far ahead toward his horse, too far away to render aid. Still holding onto the reins, Hod ran beside the horse, guiding him toward the route taken by Old Pry, keeping the animal between him and the irate, yelling owner.

ANOTHER shot rang out. It did not come close, and Hod realized that the fellow was not going to kill his horse just to capture the escaping prisoner.

"There he goes!" howled the man. "The pris'ner is escaping." He fired his gun again and again, as he pursued Hod and his vanishing steed. Hod counted six shots. The fellow's gun was empty. He mounted and put the horse to a run. Old Pry was just emerging from a thicket atop the nigger-heeled gray.

Wild yells from the jail and the sudden blatting of six-shooters warned them that pursuit was close at hand as they swung away toward the mountains. The bay was fresh and easily kept up with Pry's gray mustang.

Bullets began cutting through the brush. Hod saw Pry's horse stumble, and a sickening sensation filled his stomach. If they shot the gray it meant their capture. A horse carrying double could never hope to escape. The gray's speed did not slacken. Hod decided that it had not been hit after all.

Pry reined in behind the shelter of a sand dune.

"Feller on that blaze-face hoss is overhauling us," he said succinctly. "You keep going. I'll stop him."

The nearest pursuer came into full view. It was Shorty Johnson. The star shining on his vest was plainly discernible.

"Don't shoot the sheriff," cried Hod. "He's square."

Old Pry's rifle roared. The sheriff's horse plunged down out of sight.

"Had to shoot his hoss," remarked Pry, as he rode after the tenderfoot.

A quarter of a mile of open country lay between them and the trail that meandered into the mountains. Glancing over his shoulder from time to time Hod could see the pursuers spread out like a fan, the nearest now within three hundred yards. An occasional shot broke the stillness, but for the most part the enemy had given up trying to hit the fugitives. Hod headed across a field of tiny mounds.

Snap! His horse plunged forward, leg broken. He had stepped in a prairie-dog hole. Hod sailed over his head into a cactus patch.

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CHAPTER XI

THE MOUNTAIN MAN HUNT

EVEN as he had swung toward the promised easy going, Hod had become conscious that the old buckaroo was shouting wildly at him.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" yipped the mustanger. "Don't go thataway!"

Before he could act on the command it had happened. He had chalked up one more damned fool tenderfoot stunt against himself. The prairie-dog holes had been so thick that the mustang could not help stepping in one of them. The snap of its broken leg, the falling movement and Hod's imitation of a shooting star followed so quickly that by the time the tenderfoot got to his feet, Pry was at his side.

"Git into that saddle," ordered Old Pry, dropping off his gray. "Don't argy. Get up there, I'll hang onto the stirrup. Ain't you got no sense, ridin' pell-mell into a prairie-dog town?"

He flung up his rifle and threw a shot in the direction of the pursuers. Cries of triumph came from the possemen. Hod, realizing that he could not run in his crippled condition, mounted Pry's horse and made toward the hills, with the old man hanging onto the stirrup. Hod carried the rifle now.

Bullets began to sing close again, and deep down in his heart the tenderfoot cursed his own folly in plunging into trouble where wiser men had feared to tread. What excess of egotism had possessed him that he considered himself the equal of a Westerner in a fight on his own grounds? He had merely got a better man than he in trouble.

"We got 'em now!" yelped a deputy, and a howl of exultation greeted his words.

Three men were in the lead, less than a hundred yards behind and gaining fast. As Hod cut here and there through the brush to take the best path, he saw one of them draw six-shooter and he fired at the plunging horse. It was a miss. *Rat-ta-t-tat!* Three shots in quick succession cut up the gravel in front of them. Again Hod pulled the trigger. A sickening metallic *click* was the only response.

"Stop behind them rocks;" ordered Pry. "You'll have to stop and load."

Hod halted and Old Pry, breathing hard, plugged cartridges into the Winchester. Two hundred feet away the leading pursuer came charging toward them, waving his revolver, bellowing at the top of his voice. A little to the rear and on both sides of this central figure were two other riders. The middle man was the black bearded Pete Callen and the others were his riders. They could expect no quarter from Pete and his men.

Pry threw up the rifle and red. Pete's revolver went off harmlessly, fell from his fingers and he staggered in the saddle. Again Pry fired. Hod heard something go crashing down into the brush, and then he saw the third man turn tail and run for it. The accuracy of the old man's shooting at a plunging target through such thick underbrush was uncanny.

"All right, git onto that mountain trail," snarled Old Pry. "Here comes the rest of them."

Hod made a hairpin turn and swept through a narrow pass. Once in this pass and winding along the tortuous trail they were concealed from the other gunmen. Pry halted behind a rocky point long enough to empty his magazine at the approaching horsemen. The posse broke and sought cover. Old Pry again caught the stirrup and urged the gray up the steep slope.

"That'll hold 'em for a few minutes," he said dryly. "They won't be anxious to try to attack us again' my rifle on this trail. Let Nigger Heel slow down to a walk."

Hod slowed down and would have dismounted but that Old Pry profanely ordered him to remain in the saddle.

"I cain't trust yeh on the ground," he grumbled. "Anybody that would run a puffectly good hoss into a mess of chuck-holes like you done and break his leg is too plumb tender to walk. You should be

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creepin' yet. Reckon' I'll wake up to find out that you escaped from some children's nursery and I'll git arrested for cradle robbin'."

HE RELAPSED into a grumbling, mumbling incoherence as they labored up a very steep switchback, caught his breath as they started downhill again and took up the harangue.

"I keep larnin' yeh and larnin' yeh but you don't stay larn't. Pears to me that what I say goes into one ear and out o' the other. Good reason. Nothin' in between to stop it. Why you set fire to that cactus. S'pose you'll claim the darned thing snapped at yeh!"

"I don't know it was so inflammable," replied Hod, trying to speak meekly.

"Well, if it gets yeh hanged, that'll be a lesson to yeh. Yo're like a double-headed calf runnin' both ways to oncet. When I says, 'Be quiet, Doc!' then's just the time you start in to make as much noise as a team of broncs runnin' wild with chain harness on. When I says, 'Lay low!' it's just a signal for you to set off fireworks. What kin I do with yeh?"

Hod suddenly pulled up the mustang, dismounted and, leaving the reins atrail, began limping along the rocky path.

"If you're going to make a speech you'll have to take the seat of honor," he called over his shoulder. "And I wish you'd quit suckin' yore teeth."

"I ain't suckin' my teeth," retorted Old Pry. "You git back on this hoss. If they ketch yeh they won't be nothin' left of yeh but a gee-string and a wart."

"You go to the devil," retorted Hod. "It's your horse and I'm not asking any more favors of you."

Old Pry's Adam's apple began wiggling up and down and his wrinkled cheeks puffed in and out, as he endeavored to restrain his wrath.

"If you hadn't gone crazy over that gal! No woman ever made a fool of me, I can tell you that."

"Who did, then?"

"B-r-r-r-r-r!" sputtered the old mustanger, glaring about him helplessly. They were moving along the irregular, broken floor of a canyon littered with rock talus, cut by lateral gorges, overgrown in spots with dense brush thickets. Hod was still limping ahead, following the trail marked by the hoofs of deer and cattle. Old Pry came after him, leading the fagged gray bronco. It did not hurt the horse any to get a rest.

They turned off to follow a permanent brook through thickets of elder, wild cherry, willow and wild flowers and here they stopped to quench their thirst and allow the horse to do likewise. The heat shining through the thin dry air beat upon the dusty foliage all about them, turning the canyon into a blinding, shriveling furnace, but here by the brook a slight breeze made it more tolerable. Hod's face was streaked with sweat and his eyes haggard with suffering.

"Boy, if you don't git on this bronc I'll flatten yeh," yipped the old mustanger, as they prepared to start again. "I ain't aimin' to rag yeh. All I want to do is pound trail larnin' into yore head. You know why the owl, rattlesnake and prairie dog all can live in the same hole? I'll tell yeh. None on 'em's got any dignity. They ain't dumb like humans. Yo're uppity right now cause I've hurt yore dignity, when the facks is all I'm tryin' to do is to ride yeh so you'll do some thinkin' for yoreself. Them pot shooters is liable to be throwin' lead at us any minute."

"I can't help it because I'm tender," growled Hod, mounting the gray and starting up the trail again. "A man has to learn by experience and that takes time."

"It shore does with you," admitted old Pry grimly, "and you know the reason why. It's cause down deep yo're really swell-headed. You think because you got me beat on book-larnin', that yo're purty smart. You figger that with yore giant intelleck you don't have to use common sense like other folks. Well, jest lissen to me, you flop-eared, red-topped, corn-fed hyeeny, if you don't larn to use your eyes when yo're rollickin' along on a hoss, we won't have any."

A bullet thudded against bedrock and went whistling by. They were on an open path, barren on both sides for quite a distance. There was no shelter anywhere. Another bullet droned past them.

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"Jab him," yipped old Pry. "Git out o' here. I'm a comin'."

Hod raked the gray, which responded superbly. The old mustanger ran with the horse until he found a pile of sand that afforded shelter; then he halted and drove the pursuers back behind a ledge.

Cries from Hod caused him to abandon the sharpshooting and run to the tenderfoot, wondering what fool thing the greenhorn had done next. As he came to the top of the little ridge, he saw Hod hobbling swiftly along in a sort of hop, skip and jump, while the gray with the reins fastened to the saddle horn trotted ahead of him.

"Don't run after him," bellowed the buckaroo. "Don't chase him, you calf-kneed roan. How come you turned loose of him?"

"I didn't. I dismounted and he started away."

"You didn't trail the reins. You left 'em up."

"You never told me about that."

"But ain't you got eyes. Ain't you seen me allus drop the reins to the ground? Ain't you done it thataway yoreself, till just now when we need a hoss to git us out of a tight pinch?" He was hurrying along at Hod's side as he orated. "What did I jest get through tellin' you about usin' yore eyes. Everything worth larnin' ain't writ down in books. You got so use to takin your wisdom predigested and labeled, that you don't recognize it outside of print. Now there goes our hoss and we got to walk. Feller, if the swellin' ever goes out of yore conk, I'll have to take dallies around yore haid to keep it from fallin' down yore windpipe."

Chapter XII

CATTLE RUSTLERS

AHEAD of them trotted the horse on a ledge so narrow that it would have been perilous to attempt a turn. A vertical rock wall rose above them to a dizzy height. Below they looked down upon a ravine studded with jagged lava fragments and boulders. They did not dare make any attempt to capture the horse here, and so they had to remain quiet while the mustang rapidly widened the distance between them.

The tenderfoot's leg was swelling again and he staggered as he walked. Pry had to warn him several times to hug the wall. The trail wound like a snake along the side of the mountain and at places they could look back over the route they had come at the white path amid dun foliage, at the plains and mesas and gorges stretched out below, at the hills of the lower levels covered with maguey, snake-weed, barrel cactus, palo verde and greasewood. A sudden turn brought them out onto a point into plain view of the pursuing horsemen. Guns flashed and roared and loud yells came from the posse.

Pry roughly shoved Hod flat against the base of the cliff as bullets spattered all around them. Like an animated tumble bug, he rolled behind a stone projection, rested his rifle against it and fired carefully, once, twice, three times. Hod, scrambling for cover from shots that kicked dust into his eyes, saw a man swing free of his saddle just as his horse plunged into the ravine, saw the posse turned into a struggling, confused mass by the mustanger's deadly fire and then he, too, was around the turn and running to safety. With a sinking heart he saw that Nigger Heel had broken into a canter and was now two miles ahead of them.

Hod was paying for his carelessness. By the time he traveled two miles or more on his crippled leg, he would not have to be told a second time to leave the reins of a Western horse atrail. Old Pry had relapsed into silence. He did not even glance at the tenderfoot.

Before them lay the barren hills blistering in the heat of a tropic sun. Skyward and to the east, Snow Peak gleamed white and icy many thousand feet above the mesa levels, crowned by a halo of fleecy clouds, a tantalizing spectacle to suffocating men. Mile upon mile, Hod could see the dead rocks of this desolate

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region extending in every direction. Alkali dust hung choking in the air like a curtain. The prickly plants were gray with it. It showered down on them when they touched a bush. Hot, dry, lifeless, this desert land seemed like a great monster whose unseen tentacles gradually wrapped around a man's body and soul until it was wrung as dry and crisp as the rattling, parchment skin of a long-dead steer. The gunmen, on the trail behind, seemed less fearful to the suffering tenderfoot than the yawning gulf of the canyon and the blackened leagues of jagged lava and sandstone.

They slid down steep paths, only to climb up still steeper ones on the other side. Hod was burning up with thirst. His mouth felt slimy. There was no water. The desert bag had been left on the mustang. Old Pry did not seem to mind the discomfort, though his horse was nowhere in sight, now, and this meant they were stranded in the mountains without shelter, food, transportation or cooking utensils.

IN THE afternoon the sky became streaked and a rainbow flashed between them and the sun. Rain was falling from horsetail clouds so high in the rare, heated atmosphere that it never reached the ground. They left the land of mesquite, spooky joshua and thorny ocotillo and emerged into the Western yellow pine zone. It seemed like another land. Green replaced gray as the dominating color. They came upon a brook of cold water. Birds sang in the branches of the conifers and a faint breeze rustled the foliage. The matting of pine needles that carpeted the forest seemed like a bed of down to Hod Farlin when they stopped to rest.

"There's the mustang!" exclaimed Hod, pointing to a creek bed where the gray was drinking. "We'll have to surround him."

Old Pry shook his head and held up two fingers of a grimy hand.

"Know why them two fingers is cleaner than the others?" he demanded. "Well, I use 'em to whistle my hoss with. When I git where he can see me, he'll come."

Old Pry thrust the aforesaid fingers into his mouth and whistled shrilly. The gray looked up quickly, shook its head and then gazed at Old Pry as if uncertain whether to obey the summons. After a moment it took several tentative steps toward its master; then trotted over to him.

"Didn't dare whistle to him back on

that ledge," commented Pry, as Hod slid prayerfully into the saddle. "He'd a turned and mebby fell over. After the shootin' he got too fur away. But I knowed all the time he'd stop at the fust water and would come to me if I caught up."

"You'd have saved me a lot of worry if you'd told me that," said Hod.

"Why should I save you worry?" retorted the old mustanger. "You ain't struggled with yoreself to save me any misery."

They camped that night by a cold, clear stream beneath narrow-leafed cottonwoods and alders, where broad-tailed hummingbirds darted among the wild flowers and tuft-eared gray squirrels scolded them for the intrusion. Before the sun went down the air was filled with the singing of thrushes and sparrows. The creek glistened with the silvery scales of mountain trout, and occasionally they could hear a *plop* as one jumped for a fly or insect. The banks of the stream were cut up by the sharp hoofs of deer and there was sign of bear and cougar.

Such was the mesa country. A few hours before they had been blistering under a desert sun in a dead land. Now they were chilling in the mountain cold beneath evergreen boughs.

Although they had not seen their pursuers for some time, Old Pry took no chances. He selected the very driest wood for the fire and built an economical one despite the growing frigidity. First he attended to the mustang, then he dressed Hod's leg and finally he speared a trout and prepared the evening meal.

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"Time for a little powwow," asserted the mustanger, leaning back against a rock which he had skillfully arranged so it would be heated by the fire. "I been thinkin' that mebby this trip won't do you justice. You reckon' they's enough opportunities to raise hell in these mountains to keep you contented a spell?"

HOD did not answer at once. His eyes were on the patch of clear blue sky visible through the foliage. It seemed to him that he had never seen so many stars in all his life. The heavens seemed to be ablaze with them. The air was filled with the balsam odor of fir, the sweet scent of flowers and the acrid tang of tarweed. The rippling brook made music among the stones. The despair that had possessed him was gone. It seemed almost good to be a fugitive, just for the privilege of being here in the silence of the great forest.

"I'm jest a ole man, waitin' to die," pursued Pry. "Don't make no difference what I do. Nothin' to stop me from livin' in these mountings for the balance of time and we could do it, too. They ain't no country I cain't live off'n, mounting or desert. Question is right now, are we goin' on into the wild mustang country or ain't we?"

"I appreciate all you've done for me, Tom," said Hod abruptly. "I've dragged you into a mess that's none of your affair——"

"Nor yours."

"Just the same I'm still making it my business. Oh, don't start raving about me butting in. I know what I am by this time, from your delicate hints. What we saw in Jamarillo convinces me more than ever that Callen and his gang are crooked and that they are out to swindle Helena. I can't go off mustang hunting and let them do that. I've got to find some way to fight them. If I can get me a horse and a gun——"

"You'd turn right around and lose 'em," Old Pry finished the sentence for him.

"I'd go up against that outfit single-handed," broke in Hod fiercely. "I'm beginning to get sore. I don't ask you to join with me. It wouldn't be fair. It's none of your fight, Tom, and I'm only making it mine because, as you say, I'm a damned, flop-eared, red-topped, corn-fed hyena! Were not those your words?"

"Looky here," sputtered Old Pry, "you ain't gettin' quarrelsome, are yeh? I'm peaceful and soft-spoken, and I expect you to be the same. Who says this ain't my fight?"

"You seem to object——"

"*Seem* to object!" yipped the old mustanger. "I thought I made it plain. I do object. I'm a chronic objector, and I'm proud of it. No, son; you cain't deal me out of this game. I'm in it to the finish. We'll hide out up here until that peg of your'n heals up; then we'll raid Callen's' own outfit, git hosses and guns and start unravelin' some bullets."

IT WAS pitch dark in the canyon bed. Hod Farlin strode along at the head of the gray mustang; Old Pry followed up the rear. The tenderfoot's ankle was almost healed and, as he stepped swiftly ahead in the gloom, a strange exultation possessed him. He had nothing, not even a dollar to his name. He had been robbed of everything from his horse to his pocket knife, and at this moment he was as poor as any tramp, yet he found it in his heart to be glad. The great silent strength of the mountains and desert seemed to be pulsing through him. He had perfect health, a fine physique, a good appetite and freedom to roam a country as vast as a kingdom. What more could man ask? And yet he did ask more. The urge for excitement, for action, was upon him. He was ready now to come down out of these mountains he had learned to love and fight for Helena Masters.

The canyon broadened. They came out onto a mesa. Suddenly they saw dark forms moving all around them; a steer snorted and shied away and a voice called a sharp challenge.

"Back!" rapped out Old Pry. "Yank that hoss back."

A streak of fire split the gloom in front of them. Hod pulled the horse around and prodded him into a run as they made for cover. The air was filled with the sudden

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bawling of cattle, blatting of calves, the shouts of men and the sharp crack of guns.

"Don't stop!" cried Pry. "Keep goin'." The old fellow came alongside Hod and began to take the lead. "Rustlers!" he gasped. "We run into a band of rustled cattle. Bunch of punchers with 'em. Wonder we didn't get killed. You hurt?"

"No," replied Hod. "And the gray wasn't hit, either."

They drew behind a sandstone pillar just as the dark shapes of horsemen came into view, riding pell-mell after them. Hod had the rifle. Without waiting for Pry's command he pointed the gun at the level of the oncoming riders and pumped lead at them. A cry from one of them told him he had made a hit. The others slackened their speed.

Pry shouted commands and suggestions in a dozen different tones, giving the impression that he had many men with him. The pursuers drew back against the canyon wall. The fugitives could hear them talking for several minutes; then they rode back toward the herd.

"Let 'em go," snorted Pry. "It's none of our business. I'm goin' to find a place to make camp."

"I'm going to look into this," insisted Hod. "One crook leads to another. If I find out what these rustlers are doing it might connect up with Callen and his outfit."

Old Pry made a great pretense of resisting, but in reality he welcomed action. It was certain the mouth of the canyon would be guarded and they would not be allowed to follow the cattle that way. They solved the problem by following a cutoff trail that led them in the general direction of the rustlers' country. Presently they heard cattle bawling. Old Pry tied the horse and they went forward on foot. Shouts, cursing, the trampling, squealing, bellowing of steers, cows and calves sounded louder and louder, then died down.

Plunging through brush and in and out of pits and washes, they finally reached the edge of the precipice where they could look out over the mesa. It was the same broad tableland where they had encountered the herd of cattle only a few minutes before. With their own ears they listened to the noises that could have been made only by a herd of stock. And yet now the mesa lay below them in the moonlight, bare of any living thing. Nothing moved where all had been dust and confusion but a short time previous.

Old Pry scrutinized the country all around them carefully before he motioned for Hod to follow him back over the trail they had come. Leaving the horse where he was, they skirted the precipice in the opposite direction.

As they came out from behind a rock cluster, Hod was sure he again heard the noise of cattle. Abruptly the whole thing lay below him. Tucked cozily in a blind canyon, whose entrance was concealed by brush and trees, was a log cabin, a series of corrals and some sheds. Cattle now filled the greater portion of the natural corral. Men with lanterns ran here and there. A yellow light filtered through the windows of the log house and at the entrance a fire burned merrily, showing where one of the guards was stationed.

Chapter XIII

HAMSTRUNG

HOD gazed at the stirring scene with wide eyes, his heart beating like a trip-hammer. He had heard of rustler layouts, but never in his wildest dreams had he expected to come upon one, especially under such dramatic circumstances. It was too dark down there to recognize any of the men or even tell the number of them. Their hideout was perfect. Except for the narrow pass at the entrance, the place was entirely surrounded by jagged, rocky walls.

Set back in a mountainous country seldom penetrated by man, its entrance concealed by a tortuous path of growing

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brush and trees, the rustlers' camp never could have been discovered except by accident. Even Old Pry, with all his mountain lore, would not have suspected its existence had not the disappearance of the herd led him to the conclusion that it must be nearby.

Crouching behind a boulder on the seamed and trenched rim of the sandstone cliff, Hod and Old Pry watched the cattle thieves settle down for the night. The watch was changed. Lanterns disappeared. The yellow glow from the window vanished. The cattle ceased to mill about. They could plainly see the guard at the gate, wrapped in blankets, half sitting with his back to a tree trunk, smoking while the firelight illuminated his features.

"Let's get going," suggested Hod eagerly. "I could sneak up and bean that guard myself."

"Don't fly off the handle now," advised the old mustanger. "We don't know the lay of the land yet. They may be a outside guard, too, and he won't be so sleepy cause they won't let him have a fire out there. I want to look this place over in the daytime, afore I try to capture it single-handed, with only three more cartridges left for the rifle."

They went back to the gray mustang and started deeper into the mountains. It was daylight before old Pry found a stopping place that suited him. It was far enough away so he could shoot his rifle and not be heard and it was in the deer country. It was out of reach of possible discovery by any of the rustlers who might be hunting.

"I'll leave you to pick a good place by some stream for our camp," said Old Pry, his eyes on the marks left by cloven hoofs in the mold. "This appears to be a frisky young buck that just passed here and I don't think he'll go far, not being scared much or run by dogs. I'll git us a nice breakfast steak off'n him. After victuals we'll sneak back there, size up the rustler outfit and figger our plans."

"Great!" enthused Hod. "Hop to it, old-timer."

Old Pry squinted a suspicious eye at the sky. The wool-pack clouds floating in the heavens, like masses of fluffy snow, had become thicker and streaked with brown.

"You remember all the things I told you about making camp," said the mustanger. "Use dry wood. We don't want them fellers to see our fire. Don't make any bigger blaze than you have to. That's desert style."

"Oh, I know all that," Hod said impatiently, starting away leading the mustang. "I'm through making mistakes. I haven't pulled a boner for two days now. Guess I'm as trail-wise as any of them by this time."

Still Old Pry did not depart.

"I'm oneasy about leavin' you alone," he admitted. "Don't 'pear to be any way you can stir up a hornets' nest, way out here, but I don't trust yeh, just the same." Again he looked at the sky. "Looks a mite like rain. You better——

But Hod was already around the turn,

out of hearing, and the mustanger did not follow him. The tenderfoot found an ideal spot beside a cold clear stream in the bottom of a small creek gulch. Here he removed the pack containing their few cooking utensils, salt and other supplies from back of the cantle, stripped off the saddle and bridle, gave the gray a good roll in the sandy creek bed and picketed him out where the Colorado bluestem and black gramma grass were plentiful. He spread sweat pads and blankets out to dry and rustled wood for the fire, all the while listening for the crack of the rifle that would tell him Old Pry had got their breakfast. Merely being alive out here in the wilderness somehow fascinated the tenderfoot. The odor of burning wood, the aroma of coffee in the pot, the soughing of wind in the trees like the constant beating of ocean surf, the gurgling noise of running water—it all seemed an essential part of the great adventure. A striped chipmunk appeared on top of a log and examined Hod curiously out of shining black eyes. Brilliantly col-

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ored hummingbirds simmered from flower to flower. A woodchuck whistled from a ledge high above his head.

"Gee, this is great!" Hod exclaimed aloud. All other considerations seemed dwarfed by comparison. That he was a fugitive from justice, helpless, horseless and unarmed, meant nothing to him at this moment.

A cool breeze rustled in the cottonwoods. A shadow passed over the sun. Hod, glancing up, saw that the great woolly balls in the sky had turned black in wide streaks. Far, far away, jagged tongues of flame leaped across the firmament. A low mutter of thunder came to his ears.

"Another rainless rain, I suppose," Hod said to himself, remembering the previous attempt when the water had evaporated before reaching the earth.

HE CLIMBED up out of the creek bed and started in the direction taken by Old Pry. The old man generally wanted him to help butcher the deer and carry it in. Almost at once he heard a rifle spit and a deer burst through the brush and fell not a hundred yards from him. Hod reached it as soon as Pry.

"Looks like rain," said Old Pry, as he began the butchering job. "Hope you got a good place to camp."

Hod did not answer. He knew that no matter what he said, Old Pry would probably find some fault with him, and so he fell to a discussion of their plans for raiding the rustlers.

"Of course if we find they're too strong for us we can go for help," suggested the tenderfoot. "I think if I went to Shorty Johnson, told him what we have found and offered to lead him to it, it would go a long ways to convince him of my innocence."

Old Pry thrust a heavy quarter upon him and, taking one himself, rose groaningly to his feet. He was not a young man any more and he had the old man's habit of grunting and groaning at any unusual exertion.

"Git goin'," he commanded. "We got a ravine to cross before we git to camp. They's goin' to be a cloudburst in a minute." The old mustanger's desert experience told him that they were due for one of those torrential rains which sometimes fall in the mesa country. In a few minutes canyons and ravines are filled from bank to bank by these downpours.

Drops began to fall with the noise of scattering shots. It became like the sustained roar of musketry. The earth was enveloped in a mass of water. It came down in sheets. Flashes of lightning penetrated it, flaming so near, so viciously, that it seemed the earth would be rent asunder.

Old Pry broke into a run. Hod followed. They plunged into a ravine that had been dry when they crossed it. Water was up to their knees and rising with incredible rapidity. Hod leaped through the roaring cataract, missed his flooting, went under, still clinging to the quarter of deer, and then pulled himself to safety among the rocks. He looked back just in time to see Pry swept off his feet.

Throwing the deer meat up on the bank, he jumped in after the old buckaroo, caught him by the collar and dragged him to a flat rock. A moment later they were crossing the higher ground, soaked to the skin, hats gone, matches all wet, but triumphantly bearing the meat for breakfast.

"A hu-hu-hot cup of coffee is what I need," chattered Old Pry. "Thank hevving you had a fire goin' and the pot on."

Hod did not say anything. A great fear had been creeping over him, and this now became a certainty.

"Now a tenderfoot would make camp in a ravine like that," Pry was saying. "It's a sure sign of the greenhorn. You've watched me often enough to know better. But say, where the hell is the camp?"

Hod buried his face in his hands. A groan escaped him. One trembling forefinger indicated the creek bed below them.

"Down there," he moaned. "I've made a mess of it again."

Where the camp, the fire, the cooking outfit, the horse had been was nothing but swirling waters.

"Everything's gone," admitted Hod miserably. "'Hoss, outfit, everything."

The little old mustanger's flat chin sagged, his round black eyes grew rounder and he crouched before that bellowing, roaring flood as if he would leap into it.

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Then he suddenly sat down on a rock and began plucking his beard out by the roots.

CHAPTER XIV

FISTS AGAINST GUNS

THE rain ceased abruptly, leaving the earth washed clean. The air smelled trebly sweet, but not in the minds of Hod Farlin or Old Tom Pry. Brimstone was the element that filled Pry's nostrils. Wordlessly he went forth to salvage what he might. They found the dead carcass of the horse jammed in between the rocks, a hundred feet or so down stream. The mustanger removed the hackamore rope and wound it over his shoulder and around his waist. He would not trust it to the tenderfoot, and whenever the greenhorn started to speak the Westerner shut him up in short order. Pry was really angry now, seething with a cold, fierce wrath. They had been helpless enough before, with only one gun and one horse between them. Now, with all their provisions, pans, matches, salt, blankets and tarpaulins gone, they had nothing on which to cook their food, nothing to light the fire with, nothing to keep them warm or cover them over at night and they were afoot in a cattle country, where a good horse often means the difference between life and death.

All this had been inflicted upon him by the dumbness of a tenderfoot who should have known better, Old Pry figured. To cap the climax the mustanger had but two shells left for his .30-30, which meant they were helpless in a fight and would be without the means of getting meat in a few days if they had to remain in the mountains.

Filled with a great hankering for manslaughter, Old Pry hunted his belongings until he became convinced that further search was fruitless; then with the rope still draped around him and the rifle over his shoulder he started toward the rustler camp without a word or a glance in Hod's direction. The tenderfoot followed silently.

IT WAS late afternoon when they again perched on the edge of the cliff above the box canyon and gazed upon the rustlers' retreat. Cattle branding was going on in the field beneath them. Ropes snaked in and out. Cow ponies braced themselves. Steers went down in a bellowing heap and men leaped in to pin head and legs to the ground, while the branders applied cherry hot iron through wet sacks to blot out the old markings. The place was alive with movement, with shouting men and bellowing steers, blatting calves and mooing cows.

Hod counted five men working with the stock. Another, mounted, was on guard near the concealed entrance and presently they saw a dudishly attired gambler come out and sit down on the front step of the cabin. That made seven in all, providing the rustlers were here in full numbers. All were too far away for recognition in the dust-filled atmosphere.

In the daylight the hideout appeared even more impregnable than at night. Only at this point where Hod and Old Pry stood was it possible even to approach the edge of the precipice by normal means. Here the wall fell away sheer forty feet, then slanted off in a ragged, broken slide of boulders and sandstone blocks, sixty or seventy feet more to the floor of the box canyon.

The pass that gave entrance appeared to be so narrow that only one horseman could come through at a time and evidently was well guarded. If there were any dogs about they were tied up, perhaps because of the danger that their barking might disturb the cattle or attract attention.

"All they have to do to keep horses from goin' through that pass is to tie knots in their tails," mused Old Tom Pry. "But narrer or not, I got to make it now. No hoss, no saddle, no food, no tarpaulin', no ammunition—goshamighty we couldn't last the week out."

"I'll go down there," said Hod grimly. "Let me have that rope and I'll try going down this cliff tonight——"

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OLD TOM PRY'S cold stare went right past Hod and through him, but he never seemed to see the tenderfoot at all. He deliberately turned his back on Hod Farlin and resumed his inspection of the box canyon. Evening came. Branding finished, the cattle were driven away. Two men accompanied the herd, leaving five in the place, including the dude who had done no work. Lights appeared in the various rooms of the log house and they could see a fire blazing merrily in a big fireplace through a window of the living room. Presently this blind was drawn and even the imaginary warmth was taken away.

Still without speaking, Old Pry fastened one end of the hackamore rope to a sturdy tree trunk and under cover of the darkness crawled right up to the edge of the cliff and lowered it. It failed to reach the point where the rocks began to slant off by at least ten or fifteen feet. Dangling at the end of it a man might jump to safety below under ordinary circumstances, but here circumstances were not ordinary. Approach would have to be noiseless. If he jumped to that shelf he would dislodge rocks and bring the entire household down upon him.

Hod again urged that Old Pry let him make the descent. The mustanger continued to ignore him. When he spoke he talked to himself.

"I've got to get ten feet more rope and where in hell is it comin' from. We ain't even got a blanket to cut up."

"There's only one possibility," suggested Hod. "We'll have to use our pants."

Old Pry turned on him with a snarl.

"No, yeh don't! No, yeh don't, young feller! You've took everything I've got, even my hat and coat, but you cain't have my pants."

In the end the old fellow succumbed. If anyone had been out there in the wilderness to see, they might have made out two strange, haggard creatures, crouched like hungry turkey buzzards on the edge of a precipice, attired only in their beard, shirts and red and blue underwear, respectively, cutting their pants into strips with a knife.

There was nothing else for them to do, the inevitable had mastered them. They had one chance and only one of getting out of this wilderness alive and safe, and that was by capturing guns and horses from these rustlers.

Old Pry insisted on making the descent. Hod had to yield to him. The plan was for Pry to get down there before the moon was up, attack the guard at the gate, render him unconscious, take his weapons and horse and then take care of the outside guard. After this was done both would be armed and could decide a further course of action.

A biting wind, that seemed to come off the snow-covered surface of the white mountain peaks, chilled them through and through. Old Pry had to hold a plug of tobacco in his mouth to keep his teeth from chattering, as he made his few belongings

up into a bundle. A few silver coins, a battered pocket knife, a sack of tobacco and papers wet through, a bundle of ruined sulphur matches, a gold nugget the size of a pea and a few odds and ends comprised his total possessions.

"Terbaccy's wet and no matches to light a cigarette if it was dry," grumbled the old mustanger. "Danged if it don't look like yo're tryin' to sour my disposition. You've tuk away everything I've got, even to my pants, and it all come of me tryin' to learn yeh. I've teached yeh everything I know and yo're still a ignerant fool."

He added his plug of tobacco to the stack and tied it up in a handkerchief, but his tongue never lost a count. Even on the verge of this dangerous stunt, he could not refrain from his habit of complaining.

"Now remember," he warned. "Don't you butt in. I'll take keer of that inside guard, put on his duds, sneak up on the outside guard, bean him and then it's yore turn to speak a piece. Until then you lay low and keep yore hoodooed carcass out of my way. When a bright idee hits you of a sudden, jest remember that yo're the little end of nothin', whittled down to a point."

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HOD fastened the rifle securely across the old man's shoulders, tested the rope with his own weight and then noiselessly lowered it over the side into the black canyon. Gazing downward from the dizzy height at the spectral wraiths of pallid stone, seemingly floating in the gloom of bottomless pit, the tenderfoot was stricken with a new terror. A deathly silence hung over the sombre blotches of bush and crag. Distant stars were feeble candles glowing ineffectually in limitless space. Rugged, bleak and forbidding, the mountains arose on every side like the sepulchral walls of a tomb.

Hod caught old Pry's wrist, as the mustanger began to slide into the savage chasm.

"Let me go," he whispered desperately. "I've got to do it. I can't let you take all the risk."

"Turn me loose," bleated the old man. "I'd be takin' more risk if I let you do this. If this wall was so steep shod lightnin' couldn't go down it, I'd have to do this jest the same. You'd be as helpless as a one-legged consumptive in hip boots—turn me loose. Yo're so scairt right now I could light matches on the roof of yore mouth."

Reluctantly Hod unclasped his fingers from the buckaroo's bony arm. Old Pry vanished over the edge and began descending, hand over hand. In a moment he became a hobbing speck against a sea of gloom. The rope began to swing. Hod reached over and held on tightly, trying to damp the pendulum movement, but in vain. The rope fibre frayed out where it rubbed against the rock. He had been very careful to place it against a rounded surface, but now it moved over a jagged edge that cut strand after strand.

Hod tried to signal Pry by jerking on the rope, but the old man's own movements prevented him from feeling it. He could barely see the bobbing, swinging figure in the intense gloom. He dare not call him. That would bring the guard up shooting. The rope was half cut through now, and still the old mustanger dangled from it. Hod wanted to cry out at his own impotence. Would Pry never reach the ground?

Hod, stretched flat at the very brink, reached out his long arms in a frantic effort to catch it below the break. His fingers barely touched. He could not get a grip. He was like a man waiting to see another plunge to his death with inches preventing a rescue.

OLD PRY was out of sight now in the shadows of the rock wall. It seemed to Hod that the mustanger must have reached the slide, yet the pressure on the rope did not relax.

Then it happened, the noiseless parting of the rope, the slight impact of a falling body, the loud clatter of rolling stones, cries, the spurt of flame from a six-shooter, followed by loud yells from the cabin! He strained his ears for the mustanger's voice, for the crack of his rifle, but he could not hear any sound from his partner. He did not know whether the mustanger had been hurt or killed in that fall. One consolation came to him. He knew Pry had not fallen far. After all, he had followed the right course in letting him continue the descent.

"Here he is," Hod heard a voice cry out. "I've got yeh covered. Don't move." He vaguely recognized that tone as belonging to Deputy Sheriff McArdle.

"Don't shoot," rapped out the commanding voice he had heard beneath his jail window in Jamarillo. "He's unconscious. Get out, all of you, and find his partner. He didn't come here alone. There must be another fellow at the top of the cliff. Shoot to kill."

Hod wasted no more time on this spot. Filled with a sickening sensation of failure, realizing that now he was indeed helpless, he still understood that he must retreat rapidly and try to figure out some plan to carry on. Old Pry must be rescued. He must get help.

Hatless, coatless, trouserless, he ran for shelter, a bearded wild man in blue under drawers, doing classic steps on a flinty ridge in the moonlight. In one hand he carried Old Pry's possessions wrapped in a handkerchief and in the other the tintype picture of John Sanborn's wife. He dodged into a thicket just as two riflemen came running into view. Hod did not know either of them, though the moon had now come up and revealed their faces.

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One of them hurried toward the spot where Pry had made his descent; the other took up a position on a knoll, from which he could cover the country all around him, rifle at the ready, prepared to shoot at the first movement he saw.

CRAWLING on his hands and knees through brambles that ripped his blue underclothing to shreds and bit into his flesh in a score of places, Hod fled for his life. The instinct of self-preservation endowed him with superhuman speed and skill. Before the first rifleman had reached the rope, Hod was past them and out of their sight on the side of the hill that broke down sharply onto the mesa floor.

Here he halted for a moment to take stock. Three courses lay open to him. He could surrender and take the long chance that the rustlers would not kill him; he could hide in the wilderness with the almost certainty that he would die of cold and hunger; or he could make some kind of an attack in an effort to rescue Old Pry.

As weapons for an attack he had a pocket knife, a plug of tobacco, a tintype, a few sticks of amole root that he used for soap and his bare fists. In a long series of misfortunes he had lost all his possessions. The final blow that had deprived him of his pants and his partner, had also taken his sole weapon, Old Pry's rifle. Unarmed and unattired, it seemed utterly impossible that he could hope to cope with a strongly entrenched crew of rustlers. Why, this might be the band of killers led by the Wolf, a man who shot down innocent people on the slightest provocation; the outlaw who had been frightened out of Coyote Wells by the scourge of black smallpox.

Even as his thoughts darted here and there, Hod was making his way cautiously but swiftly toward the concealed entrance. Come what may he must attack. It was his only hope. And now was the time to strike with at least two of the desperadoes up there on the ridge searching for him. That left but three in camp. Bare-handed he must whip three armed men.

CHAPTER XV

THE CHIEF RUSTLER'S SECRET

BACKED up against a sandstone wall, six-shooter slightly extended in front of him, black eyes constantly sweeping the moonlit area of rocks and brush that extended beyond the entrance to the box canyon, the guard presented an almost impregnable point of attack. The fellow's steeple-crowned, bell-brimmed hat was pushed back from his forehead to aid his vision and his serape hung open to permit greater freedom of action. It was perfectly evident that he would start shooting at the first thing that moved.

Lying flat in a patch of wheat grass not fifty feet from the guard on the right-hand side of the trail that entered the hideout, Hod eagerly watched him for the first sign of inattention and found none. Up there on the ridge down which Old Pry had dropped, the tenderfoot could hear the two rustlers moving about, with a great crashing of brush and falling of stones. Inside the box canyon all was quiet.

Hod hugged the ground, prayed for an inspiration and hoped that something would happen to delay the return of the pair on the ridge. Where the guard stood, the pass was not more than ten feet wide. Here there was nothing but rocks. A few paces farther on, a dense thicket of trees and shrubs appeared to bar the way, but the tenderfoot knew this to be an illusion. There was a way through. Just inside there he could hear the champing of a bit and the creak of leather. That was the guard's horse.

Hod rose to his lacerated hands and knees and inched closer and closer, A pebble spun from under him. He flattened like a lizard and waited breathlessly, body tensed for the shot he feared must come, eyes fixed hard upon the Mexican who had jerked to attention. The man took a step forward as if to investigate, threw furtive glances around him and retreated with his back to the wall again. The fel-

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low was afraid of ambush. He was taking no chances of being attacked from the rear. Five precious minutes sped by. The two outlaws on the ridge might return at any moment and swell the numbers in the camp to five again. Hod found himself thinking of the outlaw; of Wolf the raider, of the joke played on him at Coyote Wells. That showed the man was a coward. If he could once face the fellow——

Hod's hand closed over a rounded rock. He was on his knees again sheltered by a little sandstone outcrop. He drew back his arm to hurl the stone at the guard; then dropped it again. He had not laid any foundation for future action. Suppose he did hit the guard and disabled him. What would be his next move? He could not fight the whole rustler crew alone. He must figure out some strategy.

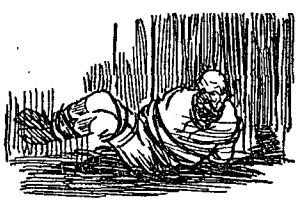
He found two pebbles of equal size and thrust them into his mouth. He discarded all encumbrances except the tintype, which fitted easily into his shirt pocket. He deliberately tore his shirt in shreds, rumpled up his hair and bit off a big chew of tobacco. He put a piece of amole root in his mouth as if it was a cigar; then picked up the rounded stone and took careful aim at the head of the rustler guard.

OLD TOM PRY tugged at the ropes that bit into the flesh of his wrists and rolled a foot nearer the cabin door. The place was in utter darkness but it was not deserted. Through a partition he could hear persons conversing in a low voice in the next room. The other rustlers were gone.

Old Tom felt around for something with which to saw his bonds, but found nothing. Bound hand and foot, still dizzy and battered from his fall, each move he made was torture to his throbbing head and aching bones and muscles.

The old mustanger's feet had been touching the highest point of the rock slide when he felt the rope give. It came loose in his hands. He had dug his feet vainly in the porous gravel, plunged backward, rolled over and over and brought up with a bang against something that had sent lights flashing before his eyes and jagged pain through his head.

Dimly conscious of the firing of guns and shouting, of faces that loomed above him, of a weapon raised to strike and the drum of horses' hoofs very close to his ears, he had waited for the expected blow. Some one lifted him and all went black. The next he remembered he was lying in a corner of this darkened room, trussed up with ropes. He did not know how long he had been here or what had happened. Hod might have been captured or killed for all he knew.



An unnatural quiet pervaded everything. The door was closed, thus cutting off any sounds from the yard. Only the low murmur of voices in the next room told of human presence.

Again Old Pry tore at the ropes. They bit deeper into the raw flesh, but did not give. Those ropes had been tied by cowboys, accustomed to the use of pigging strings, and they were drawn so tight that already his limbs were beginning to feel numb.

A door creaked. A figure stood in the doorway of the next room. A torch flamed blindingly in Old Pry's face, he heard a curse and felt himself lifted from the floor and thrown back into the corner like a sack. A brutal kick in the ribs caused him to grit his teeth.

The man kneeled beside Old Pry there in the darkness, motionless for several seconds. The mustanger's body was stiff with the expectation of a knife blow or the crack of a gun barrel on his head. He could hear the rustler breathing hard from his exertion of lifting him, detected an odor of perfume mingled with the smell of tobacco smoke and whisky and suddenly he knew this fellow. Even in the gloom he could make out the unnaturally white hair and face of the albino killer, Travers. This was the gambler who had stolen old man Sanborn's daughter and then shot the father.

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A COLD sharp blade slithered lightly across old Pry's throat. Instinctively he cringed back. A mirthless chuckle came from Travers; and then he spoke in tones as cold and merciless as the steel of the knife that rested on the mustanger's Adam's apple.

"How many came here with you?" he asked.

Old Pry hesitated. The point of the knife pricked him savagely.

"I come alone," said the mustanger.

"Yo're a liar!" Again the knife brought blood. "Who was with you?"

Old Pry set his teeth. He was made of the stuff to endure torture rather than betray a friend.

"I'm tellin' you I come here alone," he repeated. "I'm Old Tom Pry. A posse was after me and the tenderfoot, Hod Farlin. They got Farlin's hoss. He couldn't travel afoot and my gray wouldn't carry double so I had to leave him back aways, while I led the gunmen off the track. My hoss got killed and I ran out of ammunition. I raided you to git both. Don't lean yore mug so close to me. You got a breath like a turkey buzzard!"

Travers' fist crashed into the old man's face with a force that seemed to paralyze it. A trickle of blood ran down over the cheek and gathered in the corner of his mouth. He spat it out, but said nothing.

"If you don't tell the truth, I'll flay you inch by inch," grated Travers. "I don't believe you came here alone. You've led a posse down on me. You've got men hidden in the brush."

"If I had men and hosses, I'd a had ropes and if I'd had ropes I shore would never cut up my pants. Just let that soak in. I been wearin' pants since I was knee-high. Arter all these years I've become attached to the idee and I can tell you, it ain't for style that I'm goin' around without 'em. Pants is my notion of what every man should have. I wish't I had some right now."

Travers forced in the blade and gave it a heart-tearing twist. A moan escaped Old Pry's lips. The albino laughed hoarsely.

"If you don't come clean, you'll get worse than that," he threatened. "I want to know how you found this place, who sent you, who is with you? If you don't tell I'll stab you to death."

"You can't threaten me," replied Pry. "You can't add no punishment to a man about to die. If I talked you'd kill me jest the same. You'd never turn me loose after what I've seen. I had the satisfaction of killing one of yore gang, Pete Callen, before I cashed in my chips."

"Yes, damn you. You and that tenderfoot spoiled our little cattle deal with the filly, Helena Whatchamacallit. That's another thing you got to pay for. I made a mistake not killin' that Hod Farlin the first time I seen him on the road to Wild Cat."

Old Pry grinned despite his pain. Although he had ragged the tenderfoot for butting into Helena's affairs, it had been more talk than anything else. He felt triumphant over this turn of affairs. The girl was free of the swindling crew that had inveigled her weak brother-in-law in a plan to swindle her with stolen cattle. With Callen, the master mind dead, Skinner Joslin was certain to leave the country between two days if he had not departed already.

Travers lighted a kerosene lamp. He brought the match close to Old Pry's face, so that it burned the skin. The old mustanger's eyes never flinched. Small and round and black as coals, they were fixed implacably upon those of the albino murderer. Something in that gaze caused Travers to shiver slightly. He hitched his revolver forward within easier reach and glanced around the room uneasily.

THE report of a revolver caused him to whirl around with drawn six-shooter. Outside there, some one yelled. Guns cracked. The *thud-thud-thud* of galloping horses came closer and closer.

The door burst open. An apparition emerged from the outer gloom, a weird and terrible biped that resembled some huge animal rather than a man. Cheeks bulging out like the inflated chops of a chipmunk, face swollen and distorted, eyes red-ringed and glaring, bristly hair and prickly beard standing out like the quills of a porcupine, Hod Farlin rocked back

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and forth on wobbly legs as he faced Travers' revolver.

Old Pry, seeing his partner trapped, uttered a groan and closed his eyes. They were doomed now. If Hod advanced one step upon the albino, the assassin would shoot him down. Help could come from no other source. There was no one except the rustler band for many miles in every direction.

Outside, men were yelling excitedly. Two horsemen were galloping up from the pass, weapons in their hands, shouting at Travers to know what had happened. The albino ignored their cries. A slow smile of triumph creased his chalk-white features and he focused his revolver upon the breast of Hod Farlin.

"Welcome to our party," he said. "Old Pry tried to lie for you, but I knew you were around somewhere. What's *your* excuse for not wearing any pants?"

Lips drooling, arms hanging down, rolling back and forth like a sailor in a heavy sea, Hod in his tattered clothing and blue underwear, tucked in boots that flapped against his legs, more nearly resembled a scarecrow than a human. His appearance was so ridiculous that it brought a smile even to the cynical lips of Milt Travers.

"Well, speak up," ordered Travers. "How the hell did you get in here? Talk fast if you've got any last words, because you and your partner must die."

The teetering body took a long staggering step toward the albino. Travers' arm came up sharply. His fingers tightened on the trigger, the pronged hammer lifted like the head of a serpent and the cylinder, filled with yellow cartridges, moved the deadly .45 shell into position.

"Get 'em up," rapped out Travers. "Get your hands up. No tricks now."

Instead of raising his hands over his head, Hod craned his head forward, spread his hands in supplication and moaned, "Water! Water! I'm dying. It's the black smallpox!" His jaws worked convulsively upon the tobacco and the crushed soapweed. Brown-specked foam issued between his lips.

Hod was all set for Travers' sudden recoil. He saw the look of stark terror distort the albino's features, saw the gun barrel drop for an instant, and he leaped forward, his left hand tearing at the gun while his right whipped into the rustler's jaw. An explosion shattered his eardrums. The bullet cut into the floor. Hod spat out the pebbles that had given his face the appearance of having the mumps.

DOWN they went in a heap, Hod on top, Travers struggling frantically. Again he fired at random and again he missed. In a sudden excess of strength Hod shook the gun from his fingers, jerked free with prodding knee and flying fists, and reached for the gun.

Outside he heard some one shouting, "What's going on in there, Travers?"

Travers, leaping as Hod stooped, knocked the tenderfoot forward on his knee. Something hit the gun, sending it spinning into the corners.

"Help!" cried Travers. "Help!" He was on top now, struggling to break Hod's leg grip, reaching vainly toward the revolver in the corner. "I've got him!" gasped Travers. "Don't shoot when you come in."

Hod heaved mightily, filled with a terrible desperation. He came up with Travers on his back, grabbed him and threw him over his head.

"Git the gun!" yipped old Pry. "Git the gun and watch the door. Turn me loose. Goshamighty if I was only loose!"

The door swung open. Two cowboys stood framed there, weapons drawn, slightly hunched forward ready to go into action. Hod recognized one as Deputy Sheriff McArdle even as his hand closed over the six-shooter. He saw McArdle's gun swing toward him, and his own weapon flamed.

The deputy's gun popped out of his fingers like a seed from a squeezed pod. He staggered backward and Hod heard him fall to the ground. Flashes of fire flamed almost in his face. Powder burned acridly in the air. Boards splintered all about

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him. The other gunman reached for a second six-shooter in his belt. Hod flung two quick shots at him and each time he wondered that the fellow stood there, still tugging at the other weapon, head lolling a little, fingers clutching and opening like talons.

He caught at the door, pulled it shut after him and they heard him cursing as he rolled down the steps.

Hod caught Travers just as he was sneaking through the partition door.

"Come back here," he ordered sharply. It came to him that he had only one shell left. If the other rustlers closed in, he was lost. He made Travers turn with his back to the wall, took .45's from the gambler's belt and plugged them into the weapon and then cut old Pry's bonds. The room was murky with powder smoke.

With a yip of joy the old mustanger began rolling over the floor, slapping and rubbing his arms and legs to restore the circulation. Still on his hands and knees he jerked out the drawers of a home-made dresser in search for another weapon.

Hod's gun prodded in Travers' ribs. The albino recoiled from the contact.

"Don't touch me," he begged. "I don't want to get the smallpox. Keep away from me, for God's sake." In the rough-and-tumble fight he had forgotten about the plague. Now it came back to him that the tenderfoot was afflicted with the dread disease.

"Put down your hands," ordered Hod. "Now step to the door and call to your men that everything is all right. Tell them to come in. If you make one break, I shoot you down where you stand."

OLD PRY was on his feet, pulling blue denims up over his skinny legs. Sight of those pants had been too much for him. Even more important than finding a gun was this masculine craving for trousers. They sagged on his thin frame like a sack, but he cinched them around his middle and leaped into the fray. Behind the door he found a rifle, his own. On a shelf he found .30-.30 shells and quickly shoved the magazine full and levered one into the chamber.

Just outside the door they could hear one of the wounded men groaning. Aside from that, everything was quiet, too quiet. It suggested ambush. Hod remembered that there were five men in camp and he had accounted for but three. Those others were waiting out there for a chance to do some shooting on their own.

"'Open the door," reiterated Hod. "Tom, you lie down like you were tied, but have the rifle ready." He jabbed his gun hard against Travers' side. The albino swung the door in and stood just inside, the light illuminating his figure partially, leaving his holster and gun hand in obscurity. "Now call 'em and if your voice quavers, I'll shoot."

Travers cleared his throat. "All right men," he grumbled. "Come on in."

There was a moment's silence. Then out of the darkness issued a soft-toned Spanish voice, "What happen, señor? You keel *el demonio?*"

"Tell him it was no demon," ordered Hod. "Tell him it was the tenderfoot partner of Old Tom Pry."

Travers complied. He did not dare do otherwise with Hod's gun jabbed against his spine. A little, swarthy, poke-hatted man came forward tentatively like a timid doe approaching a salt lick. It was the fellow who had been on guard at the gate. Hod's thrown rock had hit him in the chest instead of on the head. The tenderfoot had seen the fellow stagger and fall, saw him start to rise to his feet again, had realized he could not take his weapons and he had leaped through the pass and onto the guard's horse. Galloping swiftly over the canyon floor straight at the door of the cabin, he had taken the others by surprise and had been able to gain the house in safety.

"'*El demonio* keek Pablo," asserted the Mexican, halting outside the doorway. "Like ghost! No-theeng was there, bot he

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keek me hard jost de same. *Si, señor* eet was a demon. You keel heem, Señor Lobo?"

Hod's revolver barrel acted as prompter.

"Ask him where his partner is," ordered the tenderfoot in a voice so low the man outside could not hear. "Then get both of them in here."

Travers perforce complied. In a moment another swarthy vaquero appeared. As they entered the room, Hod pushed the door shut and swung his gun toward them. At the same instant Old Pry hopped to his feet with leveled rifle. It took but a few seconds to disarm and bind them.

"Yo're a bear cat, tenderfoot!" exulted Old Pry. "How come yeh to think of that small pox stall?"

"I remembered how it had scared the Wolf at Coyote Wells. I decided that the leader here must be the Wolf."

"By jingo, that's figgerin' it close," the mustanger admitted, rolling a cigarette while Hod pulled on a pair of trousers belonging to one of the rustlers. "He! He! He! I'll never forget the look on Travers' face when he seen you frothin' blood and foam at the mouth. You must a bit yore tongue."

"I bit your tobacco and chewed soapweed root. Two pebbles in my cheeks bulged them out, and I splotched my face with dirt."

OLD PRY leaned back luxuriously in the bedding of a bunk and blew a blue cloud of smoke through his nostrils. Hod had found a piece of cold meat and was gnawing at it as he gazed speculatively at his prisoners. The problem now was what to do with them. Of course they would have to be taken to Jamarillo to jail, but if Hod and Pry took them, they would land in jail also. Both men had heard the Mexican call Travers *Señor Lobo*. They had caught the Wolf. They must make sure that he did not escape.

Dumped in different corners of the room, bound hand and foot, the three prisoners watched the old man and the tenderfoot in silence. Pry made a cup of coffee. After drinking it and eating the cold meat, both men felt much better. They were clothed, armed and they had horses. Only an hour before they had been hopelessly marooned in the wilderness without shelter, food, or weapons. Now suddenly they were equipped with all they required. The sudden change of fortune filled them with exhilaration.

A groan outside the door reminded them that they had a wounded man to look after. Hod brought him in, while Old Pry guarded the other prisoners. It was Deputy Sheriff McArdle. His head wobbled, his eyes opened and closed. He seemed to be going fast and yet he insisted on talking. The other man in front of the door was dead.

"You got me fair and square—I done wrong—no, Callen ain't in on it—yo're wrong, tenderfoot. Dead wrong." He waited a space, listening to Travers curse him as a squealer. Abruptly he stiffened, choked, "Tell Shorty—I'm sorry——" He was dead.

Hod moved him outside again. The two fugitives began making preparations to leave. Both needed a rest, but they could not take it. It was too dangerous waiting here. Other members of the gang might come in and surprise them.

"Guess I was wrong about Callen after all," admitted Hod, as he cinched a gun to each thigh. "Still I won't be sure until——"

"Don't you go buttin' in on Callen's affairs any more," burst out Old Tom Pry. "We got a reward comin' for takin' these bandits, and I'll need all my strength if I'm goin' to spend that money properly. That gal has told you more'n onc't to lay off. Ain't you learned yore lesson?"

Armed once more with revolver, rifles and plenty of ammunition, warmly clothed and equipped with blanket rolls, a cooking outfit and a quantity of food, the two fugitives felt as if they owned the earth. Not until each had all the plunder they needed wrapped up in tarpaulins to tie back of their saddles, did they give attention to the prisoners.

Hod untied their legs, while Pry kept them covered. He ran a lariat through the bonds on their wrists, thus linking them together and flung open the door.

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"Now march," he commanded. "We'll tie you on your stolen broncs and take you into Jamarillo in style."

"See here," protested Travers, raising his voice, "I can make you both rich. I've got gold hidden right near here. Do what you please with these oilers, but let me go and I'll give you each twenty thousand dollars."

Old Pry's voice broke into a senile irritating cackle. Hod shook his head in the negative.

"Nothing doing," he said curtly. "Move along. Get through that door."

A hinge creaked. Hod turned quickly toward the partition. He had searched that room well and found nothing, yet now the double barrel of a shot gun protruded through the opening.

"Hands up!" A girl's voice rang out, clear and cold. "Drop your guns or I'll fill you both full of buckshot."

Hod let his revolver slide to the floor. Something in the girl's tone told him he had better. Old Pry lifted his scrawny arms skyward. Travers' voice broke out triumphantly as a tall, blonde girl came into the room.

Hod did not need Travers' shout of "Jessie!" to tell him who she was. It was the girl of the tintype, Jessie Sanborn. She had come here with the outlaw, Travers, the man who had killed her father. This was where the albino hid her.

IN A moment she had cut Travers' bonds and helped disarm Hod and Pry. The tables had been turned with a vengeance. It was Travers' turn to exult. Jessie had escaped from the house, had found a shotgun in one of the sheds and had returned through a rear door just in time to hear Travers tell of his secret cache of gold. The outlaw had raised his voice intentionally, so that she would hear those words because he knew she was nearby and that she was not averse to wealth.

Jessie turned toward the Mexicans to release them, but Travers stopped her.

"Let them stay," he ordered. "You and me have got to skip. We don't want to have to split with these scum. You saddle up and go on ahead. I'll fix things up here, so they won't be any talking."

"No, no!" protested the girl with a shudder. "Not that. We will go away, to Sonora, perhaps to South America. They can do us no harm. You must not kill them."

Travers reassured her and urged her through the door. Hod saw that their one chance of life lay in detaining the girl. The albino outlaw would kill them as quickly as he would turn traitor to the men who had served him.

"One moment, Miss Sanborn," said Hod.

At the name the girl whirled around as if stung, eyes wide, color flooding her cheeks.

"How do you know me?" she demanded shrilly. "Who told you?"

Hod eyed her until she lowered her gaze. "Your father," he replied in the same low voice.

A white hand clutched at her throat. She almost dropped the shotgun. Travers swung on the tenderfoot, revolver cocked, murder in his eye.

"Don't make me kill you right before her," he snarled.

The girl stepped between them. "My father," she mumbled. "Dad—where is he? You know him?"

"He came to Jamarillo, looking for you," replied Hod steadily.

"That's enough," said Travers. "You can't work into her sympathies with your lies. Remember, Jessie, I told you what a liar he is. He is famous for his slick tongue. He'll talk you out of that gun if you let him."

"I want to hear," insisted Jessie Sanborn, a trace of hysteria in her tone. "I can't believe it. How did dad learn I was in Jamarillo?"

"He followed Travers."

THE albino caught the girl by the wrist roughly and whirled her around. He tried to shove her through the door, but she slid through his grasp, backed up

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against the wall and suddenly presented the shotgun at his breast.

"Don't you dare rough-house me," she warned. "I'd kill a man for less than that."

"You little cat!"

"Who made me a cat?"

"This fellow is lying to you. You're playing right into his hands. Go get your horse like a good girl. I'll take care of these rats. Then we can pick up that money and drift. I've enough to make us comfortable in Europe for the rest of our lives. You don't want to give that up for a fairy tale."

The girl wavered. Hod saw it was time to place his trump.

"I can prove what I say," he averred firmly. "Your father gave me a token. If you see it, you will know that I speak the truth. Let me lower my hands and I'll show it to you."

"It's a trick," ripped out Travers, glaring around helplessly from the shotgun barrel trained on his middle to the two Mexicans who glared their hate. They knew now that Travers was a traitor even to them, his own men.

Hod's eyes held the girl's steadily. He was trying to drive into her mind the belief that he spoke the truth. Upon this hinged their lives. "It is no trick," he continued unemotionally. "I have it here in my shirt pocket." He pulled out the tintype and extended it toward her.

A gasp escaped her. She staggered slightly, one hand brushing across her mouth. The shotgun barrel drooped. Travers leaped forward. Hod's long arm shot out and his knotted fist caught the outlaw on the side of the head.

Jessie retreated to the corner, shotgun raised again, focused on Hod and Old Pry.

"Get back," she ordered. "Get back. What is the meaning of this? Why is Travers so anxious that you don't talk? Where is my father?"

"Your father is dead. Travers killed him!"

Frank incredulity transformed her face. Hod followed up his accusation with the story of John Sanborn's death. Bit by bit he drove the evidence home, while the outlaw crawled to his feet, rubbing his chin and watching Jessie furtively. She was stunned. She seemed not to hear, yet she was listening with trembling intentness. Hod's words rang true. He saw she believed and it inspired him. Old Pry chipped in with his confirmation.

When Hod had finished the story he fell silent, awaiting the outcome. For what seemed hours Jessie Sanborn merely swayed there on her feet. Then suddenly she aroused herself.

"Come on, Travers," she requested in a colorless voice. "Step outside, I want to talk to you. You men stay in here."

The man and the girl stepped out into the night. Hod and Pry could hear no talking. They exchanged anxious glances, wondering what would be the outcome. They did not know but what the girl and the outlaw still had them covered and so they made no move.

An explosion burst upon the air. It was followed immediately by a second. Hod heard something thud against the ground. Then all became silent. Those two out there had reached the end of the trail.

MORNING found the two fugitives herding their prisoners toward Jamarillo.

"Well, I hope you are through ragging me for being a tenderfoot now," said Hod fervently. "If I"m not a Westerner, baptized in blood, I'd like to see one."

Old Tom Pry gazed at the young man opposite him with a grimace. Then his face contorted into a most awful expression of suffering.

"Hey there!" he yelped. "Don't do that! If yo're going to tote that weepon, set the firin' prong down on a blank. Goshamighty, I never seen a feller so plumb tender."

From separate cells in the Jamarillo jail, Pry and Hod Farlin glowered at each other and argued. Hod's suggestion that

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they ride right up to the sheriff's office and deliver the prisoners had been adopted. Old Pry had put in a minority report in favor of tending to their own business. The practical, but unappreciative sheriff, had promptly arrested the two untamed creatures and had held them under one thousand dollars bail each. He insisted that of all the charges that had been made against them, the prosecutor might make at least one stick, and he was taking no chances. Skinner Joslin had vanished, but then there would surely be other complainants against two such popular men.

"It all comes of you adoptin' this gal's troubles," grumbled Old Pry. "Whaddye git out of it? Jail, that's what. After you savin' her from that Callen gang, she wouldn't look at yeh."

"She don't know I'm here," said Hod.

"Lemme tell you something," suggested Old Pry, thrusting his nose through the bars at Hod as if he were going to peck him. "You've heerd tell of the feller that cast loaves on the water to return in the form of fishes, ain't yeh? Wal, it's all wrong. This oughter be a lesson to yeh. Look out fer number one and leave other people take keer of themselves."

"I couldn't stand by and see that girl swindled."

"Well she can stand by and see you rot in jail."

The jailer appeared, jangled his keys and swung Old Pry's door open. "You're free," he said. "A friend went yore bail. Git out."

Old Pry got out, but before he went he halted in front of Hod's cell and, biting off a chew of plug, grinned derisively.

"You heerd what the jailer said?" he challenged. "I got a friend to bail me out, account of I allus mind my own business. You're still in jail because you tried to help somebody. So long, you young hellion. After you've had time to admit I'm right, I'll mebby come around and git you out, too."

No sooner was Old Pry out of sight than the smiling jailer unlocked Hod's cell also.

"The party that bailed yeh out is in the sheriff's office," said the jailer. "You better go in there."

Hod went over to the door marked sheriff, wondering who had come to his rescue. He opened it cautiously, as if expecting a rattlesnake to jump at him. Sitting in a chair at the sheriff's desk was a girl.

"Helena!" exclaimed the tenderfoot.

She came running into his arms then.

The sheriff, who had been standing near a window, tiptoed out. He closed the door after him; then grimaced at the under sheriff.

"They ain't no accountin' for tastes," he remarked. ""The purtiest filly in the state just went into a clinch with that mule-eared tenderfoot."

GAS ATTACKS

CREWS working on drilling wells making hydrogen sulphide almost invariably wear gas masks, transforming the wells into a curious resemblance of some scene on the Western Front. Cases of conjunctivitis (gas eyes) are numerous and many accidents, near accidents and some fatalities have resulted from the gas.

On damp, still nights the gas will gather in hollows and low spots and there are several authenticated instances where motor cars or pedestrian smokers, innocently entering the hollow, have suddenly been hoist heavenward a la Elijah by the exploding gas. Many mules, horses, birds and small wild animals also have been killed by inhaling the unseen death.

So dangerous is the gas considered that some oil companies will not allow their employees even to approach one of the big oil storage tanks unless accompanied by another man, both equipped with masks. When it is necessary to clean out one of the giant tanks, these companies cut it down, deeming it too dangerous to permit a man inside, even when he is equipped with a blower type mask, supplied with air by a hose leading to a pump outside.—F. H.

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MAN THE GUNS

By DON McGREW

LIEUTENANT FITZGIBBONS WAS INCLINED TO SNIFF AT THE NATIONAL GUARD UNIT TO WHICH HE HAD BEEN TRANSFERRED IN THE CHEMIN DES DAMES SECTOR. BOY SCOUT BATTERY, WATCH FOB ARTILLERY, HE CALLED THEM—BUT WHEN THE TIME FOR ACTION CAME MAYBE HE WAS TO REVISE HIS OPINION

LIEUTENANT FITZGIBBONS had been bitterly disappointed when ordered to replace the wounded commander of this National Guard infantry regiment's thirty-seven millimeter battery. He had longed for assignment to the regular army division then in the trenches on this outfit's immediate right. Therefore he eyed Sergeant Boyle the more sternly.

"I presume," he said sarcastically, "that you've had an introduction to St. Peter, Sergeant."

Sergeant Boyle and Gunner Zoop Kennedy grinned rather sheepishly. For this was in February of '18. They were stationed at the base of a plateau, behind the Foret du Pinon, in the support zone of the Chemin des Dames sector. In the preceding fall a French drive had routed three batteries of gigantic German howitzers from this spot, and the Bavarian artillerymen had left behind them a litter of scattered projectiles, caliber .240. Sergeant Boyle had been surprised in an attempt to demonstrate the fact that one can remove the nose from a Jack Johnson without premature ascension to the unfathomable void. Some people are very inquisitive.

"It ain't as dangerous, though, as you'd suppose," the young sergeant defended himself. "I got the noses off three already."

"That'll be sufficient," snapped the new commander. "Where's your blouse?"

"Blouse, sir? In the trenches. Why——"

"Get it. Keep it buttoned up. Report back to me immediately."

While Boyle hastened to obey, Fitzgibbons selected a lone, small dugout. Soldiers? He snorted. He had yet to encounter any two of these National Guard kids dressed alike. French sweaters of a half dozen varieties greeted his eye. Some wore rubber boots, some wooden sabots, and a few had traded overseas caps with the French. A veteran of the regulars, his feathers were sadly ruffled. Why, he had even come upon one group concocting a mulligan stew of their emergency rations! Yet what could he expect from a layout whose ranking sergeant risked his own and a dozen other lives by tinkering with the nose of a high explosive shell?

"Sergeant Boyle," he inquired of that clear-eyed youngster, when he came hur-

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rying back, "you've occupied this position two weeks. Why haven't you moved any of these German shells?"

"Well, sir, the French never did. They're pretty heavy to lug around. We asked the French about them, but they says, *'Reste tranquille. C'est la guerre.'* "

Fitzgibbons snorted. The projectiles were loaded, water tight, and exploded by an extremely sensitive fulminate of mercury detonator within a bronze tube. Along the edge of the plateau base ran a road. A field, sadly pock-marked, stretched from this white thoroughfare for some three hundred meters to northward, and beyond this lay a broad swath of dense pines. These sheltered the front line companies. Beyond the forest was a line of high hills, and on these were the Germans. They looked down across the Oise Canal and the Foret du Pinon, directly into the entrance of their own former dugouts. The range was not more than eighteen hundred meters from their nearest field pieces, and nothing but a camouflage screen intervened between the position and the German gunners.

"You know that the Germans are expected to pull a big push this spring," he said. "What'll happen if they start to shell this place?"

Sergeant Boyle shrugged. "Fritz will fill it full of iron foundries." He nodded at the field. "Fritz shells that, and up behind us, about every day, but he's saving this place because he knows exactly where we are——"

"And we might move somewhere else, if shelled. Exactly. But a hit on one of those projectiles! Sergeant, you put a detail to work moving them off to a shell hole. Right off."

"Yes, sir. And do you want these moved, too?"

Fitzgibbons followed Sergeant Boyle's pointing finger. His mouth fell open. The base of the plateau was terraced in three man-high tiers, starting at the path between the dugout entrances and the camouflage netting; and these terraces stretched westward about sixty meters from Fitzgibbons's dugout, which he had entered from the third tier. There, in a clearing in the trees, were piles upon piles of German howitzer projectiles.

"Must be as many as three thousand rounds," Sergeant Boyle dryly added.

Fitzgibbons groaned. Each projectile was as thick as the average stovepipe. Upended, they reached a man's waist. Moving those shells was a task for a battalion!

"Well, you can have a corporal and a detail move the loose shells away from those old gun pits, anyway," he said. "Get 'em away from these dugout entrances, too."

WHILE the sergeant hurried to arrange the detail, Fitzgibbons started to inspect his position more thoroughly. He heard a voice in a distant dugout entrance growl, "Say, what does that Sears-Roebuck looey think we are—pioneers?" But he hurried on. It was late in the afternoon, and he wanted to thoroughly familiarize himself with the place before nightfall.

Signs of the attack and the German retreat were all around him. Leather cartridge cases, pothelmets, shovels, cans of beef, bayonets, broken rifles, *grenatenwurfers*, gas masks, gray skull caps, and German note books were strewn about in a haphazard fashion. None of the German howitzers remained in the flat pits. One had been smashed by a shell when part way across the field, and still lay there, with its mute black muzzle canted skyward, its great bay horses dead in their traces, and one of the drivers, still in saddle, pinioned with his leg underneath the animal; but there had apparently been no time in which to destroy the dugouts. Most of them were long underground galleries, with triple or double tiers of plank bunks, and provided with double entrances and shovels for escape in case shells blocked both exits. In them, Fitzgibbons found litters of German blankets and field green uniforms. But in these curios he was not at the moment especially interested. The dugouts were well enough, provided

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Fritz did not obtain a direct hit into an entrance way; but even though the men could hover underground in safety throughout a bombardment, how would they emerge to man the three rapid firing guns on the third tier? The place was a death trap. Moreover, he had nothing to man the position with save a lot of young upstarts, partially trained, badly disciplined, and without experience in an attack.

"A death trap held by a Boy Scout battery!" he groaned.

HE EMERGED from the dugout, and moved to one of the thirty-seven millimeter gun emplacements on the third tier. The gun—ofttimes referred to as a "one-pounder"—was capable of firing about thirty rounds of high explosive shells a minute in an emergency. It was noted for its deadly accuracy against machine gun emplacements, and when used, like the larger field pieces, in masked positions, had scattered whole regiments at ranges up to two thousand meters. But it emitted tell-tale clouds of smoke; direct fire with it usually involved immediate discovery and retaliatory bombardment. From these tiers nothing but direct fire would be possible, against troops which had reached the pitted field between the base of the plateau and the woods. Moreover, the emplacements had no overhead protection. They were merely enlarged shell holes. And there were no supporting troops nearer than three hundred meters. The front line companies were in the woods, at least five hundred meters to northward. His map told him that some French batteries were behind him, on the top of the plateau; but the regular army division's left flank was more than three hundred meters to eastward. It was located at the base of another plateau. The nearest troops in the zone of support, on his left, were equally distant.

"And those only a detachment of old French engineers!" Fitzgibbons lamented, running his hand through his hair. "What a war!" He shook his head gloomily, glancing at the hugh assortment of projectiles on his left flank. "Just waiting there for one hit in their midst, and then —good night!"

It seemed necessary, however, to make the best of things; the position had been assigned to the guns by the French colonel in command of the sector. Therefore it could not be changed. Yet he could at least start whipping these half-trained, unlicked cubs into shape. He wheeled abruptly about, his jaw outthrust; when suddenly he was startled by a terrific explosion.

A HURRIED glance took in a volume of smoke rising near a shell hole from which protruded a skeleton with a pot helmet atop the skull. He was about to plunge back into a dugout, thinking that a strafe was to follow, when he saw a group of men standing near the camouflage netting. They were laughing. Then he remembered that he had heard no screech just prior to the detonation.

"What the hell is going on down there?" he roared.

Several helmets, tipped at a rakish angle, turned toward him. White teeth gleamed; roguish eyes were sparkling at him; the faces beneath the helmets were wreathed in boyish grins. That was it—boyish grins! Why, there wasn't a kid in the outfit over twenty years of age!

"We were only a-throwin' a bunch of these potato smashers over the netting, Loot!" one called. "Tryin' to hit that helmet. Have you tried how they work, sir? Say, all yuh got to do is screw off the cap in the handle, and there's a string. Take and tie a whole bunch together, and fasten the strings so you can pull all at once. Then——"

"Like this, sir!" said Zoop Kennedy. In his right hand was an assortment of German hand grenades. Hollow wooden tubes with cylindrical bombs at one end, they had been wired together by Zoop's eager fingers. One could blow a man apart; he had collected twenty. Before the astounded Fitzgibbons could remonstrate Zoop had jerked the joined fuse strings with his left hand, and had thrown the united bombs in the direction of the field.

Zoop's intentions were clear enough. He meant to clear the high strip of porus sacking which screened the position from Fritz's curious eyes. Instead, a bit of the wire caught in the upper edge of the net-

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ting. The ingenious projectile hung there, not more than twenty feet over the group's heads.

"Holy mackerel!" yelled Zoop "Gangway!"

The jerk of those strings had ignited a time fuse in each bomb. Five seconds were to intervene between that movement and the explosion. No one lingered. Zoop reached a dugout entrance, caught his trouser leg on a nail, tugged frantically and dived within just as the heavens seemed to split.

Red and puffing, Fitzgibbons emerged from his own haven of safety. The netting was sadly torn. He started for the lower tier when, without a sound, there rose from behind a nearby clump of shattered trees a gigantic smoke cloud. Never in his life had he seen so great a volume of smoke spread from one spot. The billows rose higher and higher in the air; they enveloped the whole position; for at least a minute he found it difficult to see and breathe. When it had ascended, the whole vaporous mass floated away toward the blue sky like some misshapen balloon.

"What," gasped Fitzgibbons, "was that?"

A corporal came out of the trees, leading Beef Blanchard. "This big dumbbell, Loot," said the irate corporal, "unloaded one o' them .240 shells and lit a match to the powder."

"What for?" cried Fitzgibbons.

"Well, sir, I just thought I'd see what it would do."

FITZGIBBONS started to talk. He spoke with the eloquence of an old regular army sergeant, delving into the ancestry of the embarrassed giant before him, and adding information about them of what Beef had hitherto remained in ignorance. In the midst of it a ration detail departed, carrying poles and G. I. cans; and this detail had just slipped through the netting, and onto the road, when Fitzgibbons's tirade was cut short by a bevy of shells. Fitzgibbons dived for a shell hole without noticing that it was nearly full of brackish water. Beef and the corporal landed astride his back, and he was choking and gasping when he succeeded in pushing his head above the surface.

"Ninety days' extra fatigue for you, you overgrown Boy Scout!" he thundered at Beef when the short bombardment ceased. None of the loose projectiles had been struck by the seventy-sevens, and neither had any shells been aimed at the storage pile on the left. But this, Fitzgibbons declared, was sheer luck.

Resembling a wet, muddy turtle, he emerged from the muck to note that the ration detail, after a temporary sojourn in convenient shell holes, was again marching blithely down the road. They were, of course, in full view of the Germans.

"Why in the hell don't you get into that communicating trench?" he thundered after them.

"Why, that wasn't nothing, sir," one of the men called back. "From that smoke I guess Fritz thought an ammunition pile had caught fire, or something. Anyway, it's too hard walking in that trench. There ain't no duck boards."

"Get into that trench, and stay in it!" the officer roared.

Fuming, he hurried to his dugout for a change of uniforms. What in hell could he expect from these Boy Scouts? He hastened. By all the gods, it was likely that they were even ignorant of the rudimentary rules of artillery fire. He must gather the gun crews around the pieces before night fall. Perhaps they had never even taken the guns apart. Nothing in this outfit would surprise him.

Part way through his dressing he heard a sputter of machine guns aloft. Excited voices on the lower tier came to him. He buttoned swiftly. Airplanes were engaged overhead. Clambering up the muddy cleats in the slanting tunnel which led to his underground cave, he emerged in sunlight to see a Bosche plane slipping and slithering downward like a falling leaf. It plunged into the field—and there, running wildly toward it, was at least a dozen of his undisciplined pirates.

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They reached the plane, swarmed around it, but Fitzgibbons had just reached the camouflage netting when from northward came the warning screech of whistling seventy-sevens. The alert German gunners on the hills were shelling their fallen plane. Fitzgibbons's Boy Scouts scattered into shell holes. Whenever one of them jumped up to run for another hole, fresh shells followed. And the young fools were laughing! Grinning and laughing, with their helmets tipped over one ear. Miraculously, all reached the protection of the dugouts without injury. Behind them the German plane caught fire and the gas tank exploded, showering the surroundings with splinters.

"Lookit!" exulted Zoop Kennedy. He shoved a dented helmet at Fitzgibbons. "Wasn't that a close one? Lookit this watch, too."

"Will you tell me," Fitzgibbons inquired, "what you went out for? Was it official information? Prisoners?"

"Naw, sir," said Zoop. "Souvenirs."

"One of those guys—there was two—had his nails manicured like a woman's," one of the men volunteered. "Swell perfume on his handkerchief, too."

FITZGIBBONS removed his helmet and ran his hand through his hair. They had rushed out there, risking shell fire, for souvenirs! He drew a tremendous breath. "I'll souvenir you Boy Scouts!" he thundered. "Sergeant Boyle, check off every one of these men for thirty days' extra fatigue. Then you report to me at the guns with the detachment commanders, the gunners and the loaders."

The crews in question were soon assembled. He noted with satisfaction that they were somewhat subdued; at least the cocky grins were missing from their faces. He was also surprised to find the guns well oiled, and in excellent condition. Ammunition was likewise stored in readiness. Yet when he barked a few commands, testing their knowledge with blank cartridges, they stared at him.

"My God!" he cried, clapping his hand to his brow, "don't you even know how to load these pieces?"

Sergeant Boyle flushed. "Yes, sir," he growled, with a suspicion of insulted surliness. "We don't know those commands from the Gondrecourt school because we never had much data on these guns. Got 'em in December. Well, sir, our lieutenant had to dope out his own drill. Give us any target you want to hit, the range, deflection and angles o' position and what I mean is—we'll shoot hell out of it for you."

"Oh, you will, eh? Well, what, for instance, is the name of this part of the breech?"

"Don't know, sir. We call it a thingamajig and let it go at that."

"Not with me you won't. It's the rocking bolt. Well, you don't know the nomenclature of your piece, and yet you say you can hit targets."

"Yes, sir. Our lieutenant had us up all night taking the gun apart when we first got 'em. Said it didn't make any difference what the hell the *names* o' the parts were, if we could put 'em together blindfolded. Said all guns are made to shove a shell in the breech and squirt it out the muzzle. Very next day we took the guns out and shot Ned out of trees all over the place."

FITZGIBBONS was dumbfounded. Never in all his regular army experience had he heard of the parallel. There the drill regulations were arranged by weighty experts in swivel chairs who pondered and argued for months before deciding whether it was more efficient to execute right face on the right heel or the left. After testing them, and allowing their detachment commanders to use their own simple commands of "Load!" "Aim!" "Fire!" he found, to his discomfiture, that results might be achieved by other than orthodox methods. Despite their lack of instruction from the Gondrecourt school—started late in the fall of '17—their sights were properly adjusted.

"What, though," he finally inquired, "would you do in case of attack?"

Sergeant Boyle glanced at a high culvert which led under the road to the shell holes in the field. He seemed about to suggest something. Instead, he retired within the shell which enlisted men may assume before an officer who insists on being superior.

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"Man the guns," he answered, somewhat gruffly. "Then wait for your orders."

"Suppose I was wounded?"

"Well, sir, if we weren't caved in so we couldn't get the guns out of the dugouts——"

"Dugouts?"

"Yes, sir. It's a cinch Fritz has photographs of this place. Knows where our gun pits are. So we take the guns apart each night and lug 'em into our dugouts. We can set 'em up anywhere, easy as a machine gun, so——"

Fitzgibbons interrupted with a snort. "We'll have none of that!" he snapped. "In the regulars, orders are orders. The French are in command of this sector. Their colonel picked out this position. So you'd be scrambling around in the dark looking for a new gun position, eh? You'll leave those guns where they are tonight, and each detachment will post gunners and loaders—two men at each gun—every two hours till daybreak. Every man jack in the outfit will stand to at the guns an half hour before daybreak."

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Boyle.

"Maybe," Fitzgibbons finished cuttingly, "you Boy Scouts have worked out a better way of doing things. I doubt it. God help us if we get into a pinch before I get you whipped into shape. I wouldn't be surprised to see most of you hunting for souvenirs about the time a bombardment started. We'll start right off the bat undoing some of this Boy Scout stuff. Dismissed!"

LATE that night Fitzgibbons crouched wearily in the entrance to his small dugout. He had just finished a hectic evening, quizzing sentries, inspecting pistols, overlooking gas masks, bringing order out of this Boy Scout chaos. Once, when a brief gas shell bombardment fell on the woods ahead, and the klaxons sounded, he had found not a man with a mask on. "There ain't none of it floated over here yet, and probably won't," Zoop Kennedy had assured him. "You can always get a whiff of it in time, anyway." Of course he had cut Zoop short and forced the lot of them to don their masks till he was certain that the danger was over; but such experiences had left him weary. How long would it take him to transform these yannigans into soldiers?

Black darkness lay over his position, but up ahead the ghostly woods were lighted occasionally by glaring white flares. Now and again the sky, further back, was lit with sharp fanflares. Reports followed; shells came droning or whistling or screeching over the woods, according to their caliber and velocity; these burst at various points in the distance. Unfamiliar with the various German shells, he caught himself crouching at each report. Though none landed within five hundred meters of his position, he had to wait for the distant *cr-r-r-runch* before relaxing. One hit in those howitzer projectiles meant *fini la querre* for his whole outfit. Yet those kids below him were singing! From the depths of a gun section dugout came the ribald voices of a quartette, chanting:

A poor K. P. in Armantelle,
Parlez vous!
He winked one eye at mademoiselle—
Parlez vous!
When along came a loot from New Rochelle,
And the K. P. says, "Now ain't war hell?"
Pinky panky parlez vous!

"You'd think they were in some sort of a picnic!" groaned Fitzgibbons. He sighed. Far from a coward, he sensed deeply the gravity of the situation, and his own responsibility. He retired to the depths of his dugout, depressed by the repetition of the German fanflares which announced another strafe. Seldom did the French batteries reply; and the American batteries were likewise held in check. He knew that few companies were in reserve between this spot and Soissons; he knew that the French were discouraged and forced by previous

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casualties to conserve manpower. The outlook was anything but cheerful.

"Fritz can smash this line any time he wants to," was his last drowsy thought. "Tired poilus and Boy Scouts to hold it! Why'n hell couldn't we have maintained a larger regular army?"

HIS first waking thoughts were chaotic. A giant hand was shaking his bunk. The earth was rocking. Thunderous detonations resounded overhead. At each concussion he felt the earth shake beneath him; something seemed to be pressing down on his head.

He scrambled out of the bunk then, fully awake. They were being pounded by a preparatory bombardment! Pulses throbbing madly, he fastened his gas mask in the alert position, buckled his pistol belt about his waist, and grabbed his boots. Then, as he hurriedly laced them, fear gripped his heart. It was unnaturally dark within the dugout. At least a little light should have been showing in the entrance.

Hands trembling, he lit a candle. The entrance was filled with dirt. He was buried like a rat in a hole. No air could come to him save through the stove pipe.

He glanced at his wrist watch. The hands pointed to four twenty. It would be dark overhead for not more than twenty or twenty-five minutes. Then the dawn would spread. If this bombardment continued it would mean that Fritz was coming over at daybreak. The utter viciousness of this artillery fire indicated that the worst could be expected.

Tears of rage coursed down Fitzgibbons's cheeks. He seized a shovel and began spading frantically. Here he was, a prisoner, a helpless prisoner, due to a shell hit which had blocked his exit—and his men were leaderless! Why hadn't he chosen a larger dugout, with double entrances? What would become of the men? What were they doing now? Would Fritz be here before he succeeded in extricating himself?

With these sick thoughts spurring him on, he labored mightily. The entranceway was sheathed with heavy planking. In length it did not exceed fifteen feet. Under ordinary circumstances he might have spaded the few tons of dirt behind him within twenty minutes. But the explosion had shattered some of the uprights. The overhead planks were bulging. Others along the sides were split and extending into the passage. Forced to stoop, he found himself handicapped by these obstructions, while fresh dirt dribbled into the space from the rifts overhead.

The bombardment continued with unabated fury. By the shaking, the rumbling, the crashing in all directions he knew that the entire sector—and probably many others—was being hammered by great shells, small shells, shells of all caliber. At every second he expected to hear a heaven-splitting roar which would temporarily drown all the other reports; those three thousand howitzer projectiles must surely fall prey to some of the missiles which were making an inferno of the surroundings. Why, they were not more than fifty or sixty meters from the nearest thirty-seven! They could not possibly escape. Their detonations might literally blast the whole lower face of the slope away, or bury him so deeply that escape would be impossible.

Thinking thus, he redoubled his efforts. Perspiration streamed from him. It blinded his smarting eyes. His hair was matted. He flung himself at the dirt with savage curses, ground out from between locked teeth; he slipped and arose, spaded and perspired, cursed and dug like a madman. Even if only one gun were left untouched —which seemed almost impossible—he *must* get out before the Boche appeared.

At ten minutes to five the shelling ceased in his immediate vicinity. It continued without abatement, however, in other parts of the sector. This puzzled him, but he dug the harder, and within a minute was rewarded by the sight of daylight. A few more shovels full enabled him to butt his way through a hole and thrust his smeared countenance into the open.

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THERE before him was his orderly, panting as though from a hard run, but grinning. A shovel was in his hand.

"Couldn't do any diggin' outside here while that pounding was going on, sir," he panted. "Everything's all right, though—and here comes the grand finale."

Fitzgibbons's jaw hung slack. Still partially covered by dirt, he lay there for a moment, staring. His eyes were taking in a spectacle of moment. For a moment he looked down upon it, like a spectator in a box.

At his left the German howitzer cartridges were still intact! Not a shell had Fritz fired into that well remembered storage spot. They were to be reserved for a devastating explosion later on. This was to be a raid.

Where the thirty-seven millimeter gun emplacements had been on the preceding night, there remained now not even a trace of the terrace. Iron fragments literally carpeted an uneven expanse of interlapping pits, from ten to twenty feet in depth. Half of the dugout entrances on the lower tiers were filled with débris. Three forms in olive and drab lay huddled within his view. One of the gun barrels, with a shattered leg of the tripod attached, hung high in the limb of a partially demolished tree. The camouflage netting was shot away. Not a trace of his men was to be seen on this side of the road. Nor were the remaining two guns in evidence.

Fitzgibbons first thought that these guns were buried and with them the remainder of the crews. This was swept aside by the orderly's assurance that everything was all right. Then he looked into the field, and understood. Comparatively few shells had fallen there; Fritz had strafed the open spaces with fire which was scattering, designed merely to cut off communications between separated elements. Of this the scorned Boy Scouts had taken advantage. Discovering that their commander was hopelessly entombed for the time being, Sergeant Boyle had charged with his detachments to the aid of the sentries, grabbed up the guns and ammunition, crawled through the culvert, and taken up positions in shell holes with two of the guns. One had been lost; at least three men were killed; but there they were now, out in the field, about seventy-five meters north of the road, peering tensely in all directions from the lips of two shell craters.

This much Fitzgibbons saw; and he also saw a column of Prussian shock troops advancing along the road from the left, or west. At least a thousand men were there, marching in quick time, and in column of fours!

FITZGIBBONS comprehended instantly as his gleaming eyes fell on the shining pot helmets. Flame throwers were there, rifle men, wire cutters, bombers and machine gunners; there were also crews wheeling small minenwurfer mortars; this was Hindenburg's Traveling Circus, functioning as smoothly as though marching on parade. The Foret de Pinon, up ahead, was still being blanketed with fire from the Bavarian batteries on the hills; the French and American field batteries behind Fitzgibbons were being heavily bombarded; German shells were falling steadily within two hundred yards of this attacking column's flanks and extremities. Meanwhile they continued on down the road, counting with absolute certainty on the fact that all German watches were synchronized, and that a perfectly timed cessation and resumption of fire would insure them an open lane of safety till they reached their objective.

"That objective is the regular regiment on our right!" flashed through Fitzgibbons's mind. This raiding detachment had marched through a rolling lane between the French and his own regiment, from north to south, overcoming isolated resistance, till they struck the road. Then they had turned to eastward. They would march straight along behind the National Guard line companies, still being kept down by heavy shelling, and come at the regulars from the rear. The stratagem had been fully explained to Fitzgibbons at Gondrecourt.

"And not a damned thing between them and those boys in their dugouts but this Watch Fob layout!" groaned Fitzgibbons.

THEN it happened. Naturally Fritz had counted on the utter demolition of the thirty-seven millimeter position. The

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column came swinging blithely along till opposite the howitzer projectiles. The two gun detachments were crouching not more than a hundred meters distant. Suddenly Sergeant Boyle's voice rang out:

"Gangway for the ammunition!"

With this roaring command the two little guns leaped into action. Into the head of the German column poured a stream of high explosive shells. They whanged, slammed, crashed and slashed through the astounded raiders with the rapidity of a gas engine's exhaust, cutting down men in windrows, blowing them into the air, decapitating dozens, scattering the remainder in a scurry for shell holes.

But they were late in even this swift attempt to deploy. The astounded Fitzgibbons saw Zoop Kennedy was aiming directly at the German howitzer shells. Directly at three thousand howitzer shells, not more than a hundred meters from his own position! The Traveling Circus would be temporarily held up, but not necessarily stopped by these two small guns. They would deploy, and work round them, ending the game with minenwurfers and bombs. But Fitzgibbons saw first one, then two, then a third melanite steel shell from Zoop's gun explode against a high pile of the howitzer ammunition; and then the fourth one struck, and the world split asunder.

Never in his subsequent experiences was Fitzgibbons to witness such a spectacle. Whole trees were uprooted and thrown like match sticks into the middle of the Foret du Pinon. Boulders and clay shot skyward in fountains, raining down upon the fields hundreds of meters away. By

tens and twenties, by fifties and hundreds those projectiles exploded, digging craters fifty feet in depth. Hundreds of them were heaved into the air to fall upon the terrain in which the Prussians were fleeing like madmen. As a shell came tumbling down near him, Fitzgibbons saw the survivors scattering in all directions. Then a mass of dirt buried him and his orderly.

It required a minute or more for extrication. When he stood erect, the last howitzer shell had exploded. Down in the field several husky young pirates were digging out a gun, buried by dirt. All of them were bleeding, yet none had been killed. And as Zoop's gun finished a burst which followed the remnants of the attacking force into a patch of woods, where they were later to be surrounded and captured, he leaped up and faced Fitzgibbons. One sleeve had been torn away. Blood streamed from his cheek. Yet his flat trench helmet was cocked defiantly over one ear.

"Sir," he called, with a snappy salute, "the Boy Scout battery has just did its stuff. Three strikes, and the whole gang's out!"

CALAMITY JANE'S GOODNESS TO OTHERS

CALAMITY JANE, despite her colorful career as an army scout and desperate character of the Black Hills, had still some saving graces. She went from cabin to cabin nursing and helping during the small pox scourge of 1878 in Deadwood. She is said to have gone into a store in Confederate Gulch, Montana, ordered what she wanted, then with the groceries in a sack over her shoulder, backed out the door, her gun leveled at those inside. She went on up the mountain side to the "Small Pox" cabin where she was caring for a case. And when this man had recovered, she appealed to the men of the town to help him to return to his wife and children—and the "Dust" came liberally!

She saved a boy's life when he was ill of mountain fever at Rapid City.

One of the most evident cases of her interest in the welfare of others was in that of the sister of Dave Campbell. This little sister was ill and at the point of death. A doctor had left a prescription and the brother, Dave, was sent to have it filled. Jane caught up with him on the road, gave him a lift to town, and brought him back as soon as the medicine was ready. These things should certainly in a good measure balance her various unsavory alliances and generally unholy life.—T. W. S.

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GET YOUR MAN

By E. S. PLADWELL

Author of "A Ten Thousand Dollar Romeo," "The Freight Boss," etc.

DOWN IN THAT BULLET SWEPT MEXICAN DESERT IT WAS A CRUEL CHOICE THAT DEPUTY SHERIFF MCANDREWS HAD TO FACE. AND, WHEN VICTORY CAME TO HIM, EVEN THAT DID NOT BRING AN ANSWER TO THE CHOICE

MCANDREWS'S marksmanship was about the average for a deputy sheriff appointed for political reasons only, therefore he scattered rifle bullets all over the sagebrush hillock opposite his fortified position until the long silence from over there hinted that this exercise had probably bored his opponent—mentally, not physically—until the wearied cattle rustler on yonder hill had left for parts unknown.

McAndrews draped his hat and coat solemnly on a stick and then elevated them over a clump of sagebrush while waiting for the whine of bullets; but though he waved this banner temptingly from various positions for more than twenty minutes, nobody but McAndrews showed the slightest interest in the matter.

At length his big-boned frame came to its ponderous feet while his baffled blue eyes glared at the offending hillside. Nearly a mile beyond it, he saw a horse and rider racing down a sagebrush ravine, outward bound.

"Gone!" wailed McAndrews. "And I had him surprised and cornered after a week of hard work!" The big deputy sheriff mopped the perspiration off his ruddy face and sandy mustache with a red bandanna. "Eh, well; I'll have to chase him again, then. There's nothin' else to do!"

But the chasing was not profitable. McAndrews was a mile behind his quarry at the start and probably twenty miles behind when he made his regretful report about it to the sheriff at Empire City. It was true that McAndrews's little pony had staggered under 230 pounds of exasperated Scotch-Irish beef during the race while the cattle rustler's mount had sailed along with only 140 pounds of agile youth on his back; but the grizzled old sheriff ignored this.

"You've failed!" he snarled. "Dammit, I can't afford that! Sometimes I think I ought to fire you. You don't deliver the goods. You're slow; you're too deliberate; you ain't a first-class office man or bookkeeper; you won't unbend to the newspaper boys; you don't know how to play to the gallery; you refuse to jolly any influential citizens who happen to land in jail; you're not a good shot; you're not a fast rider; and now the newspapers will start kidding us all for falling down on this job. Seems to me I ought to get a different sort of deputy, eh?"

McAndrews, hat in hand, bowed his

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massive head while every particle of his honest brain tingled with apprehension, for this disaster also concerned Mrs. McAndrews and four little McAndrewses who needed all his pay and then some.

HIS eyes happened to look upon an empty swivel-chair once occupied by a high-salaried Chief Deputy Sheriff whose successor had not yet been chosen; but his futile dream of advancement to that office was gone like a burst bubble. McAndrews turned away, gazing out of the court house window toward the passing street-cars, automobiles and pedestrians of a thriving young city. Just opposite, in a rambling hall where the red paint had peeled off its front, was the Salvation Army barracks with a canvas sign swaying in the light breeze in the doorway: "A Man May be Down but He is Never Out." McAndrews's eyes began to show a gleam of interest.

"And here's an election coming!" growled the sheriff. "I've got strong opposition. Of course you're popular in the Fourth Ward; that's why you're here; you control a lot of votes down there; but when you give the opposition such a chance to criticize my office for inefficiency—mind you, it comes on top a lot of fool mistakes by my other dumb-bell deputies, and on top of last year's jail-break—I'm wonderin' if your political strength in your ward ain't outweighed by the damage you've done!"

The loyal soul of McAndrews was aghast. "But the opposition hasn't heard of this yet," he ventured, clutching at straws.

"No? Well, don't worry about that. They will!" The sheriff's fingers drummed on his desk. "About this cattle rustler, Ned Wayman. It's an important case. I've come to realize it since you've been away. The Cattlemen's Association wants to make an example of him. Ned Wayman's not much; just a young fellow with a two-bit ranch up in the hills; but he happened to cut into the pet herd of the Southwestern Land Syndicate, which means Senator John Rufus Larkin. You know Larkin? Great man. Heart as warm as chilled steel. Forgives nothing but success. He's raised such a squawk about those calves that your failure may mean the end of everything for you and me, both!"

McAndrews jammed his broad-brimmed hat upon his head.

"I haven't failed!" he roared, with newborn belligerence. "Not yet, anyhow!"

"No? That's news!"

"No! I've just started!" McAndrews's heavy cowhide boots stamped toward the door, where he whirled around while holding the knob. "You'll tell 'em I've failed when I've failed; not before!"

"What? Oh! H'm. Good idea, maybe." The sheriff gave a wry grin. "Yes, it may be a plausible out, at that. You stay away till election-day, then, and maybe I can stall these critics off. Git!"

So McAndrews took up the trail of Ned Wayman again and chased that gentleman with a heartfelt earnestness which began to wear on the victim's patience. McAndrews never quite caught up, but his doggedness caused Wayman to rush frantically through miles of perfectly useless scenery while postponing every other affair and interest in his life. The good-looking young cattle rustler, well armed and well provisioned by sympathetic friends, knew he might kill the big deputy in a pistol battle but he shrank from adding a possible murder to the other charges against him, so he ran around irritably in circles, from one town to another, visiting friends and trying to snatch a few hours of rest before the solemn McAndrews came clattering along on his trail.

McANDREWS chased him through Dry Lake; chased him through Mesa, Monarch, Red Butte, Piute and New Era; chased him into Empire City and out of it; chased him back to Dry Lake again; chased him back to Mesa, Monarch, Red Butte and all the rest, and finally chased the baffled, sleepless, miserable Wayman across the Mexican line.

Then McAndrews chased him down through northern Mexico. McAndrews hesitated at the line for only a moment.

"It's a fine point of law," he informed the brilliant stars, as he halted his horse amid the dark hills of sagebrush and cactus whose bare places glinted dully in the star-

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light. "I'll be havin' no right to come here as a deputy sheriff; no; that's not legal. But I can come as a visitor; yes. That's the best way, then. I'd better not get home before election-day, anyhow, so I'll visit Mexico like a plain American citizen, and stick with me man!"

McAndrews unpinned his official badge, tucked it into his coat pocket, and then

with his question of international law nicely adjusted, he plodded onward for thirty miles along the single-track road until he arrived next evening at a lively wayside inn whose window lights gleamed invitingly when he rounded a turn among black hills which were so high that the place resembled a canyon.

McAndrews shouldered his pony in among animals at a hitching-rack where water burbled musically into several horse-troughs, and then he dismounted and strode into the long, low-ceilinged building which was quivering to the sounds of synthetic merriment, including a guitar player, a crowd of dancers, a drunken quartet, an automatic piano which erupted deafeningly with fierce, implacable music when someone put a nickle into the slot, and a crap game where players made sudden yells of triumph.

McAndrews's eyes peered into the smoke-filled medley of human bodies and emotions, seeking the man he had pursued, while subconsciously he smelled a hostile, treacherous atmosphere which affronted him. He knew of this Los Amigos cantina by reputation; he knew that the score or so of Americans in this crowd were persons with criminal records, and he even discerned a few who were wanted in his own county; but he failed to observe the man he was after until he felt a tug at his left arm, and whirled around to look into the humorously disgusted eyes of Ned Wayman, the young cattle rustler.

"Why don't you take a rest?" inquired the aggrieved Wayman, shouting through the jangle from the automatic piano. "Don't you ever run down?"

McAndrews's heavy right hand shifted toward his hip but he checked this futile movement. The other saw it and smiled grimly, beckoning the deputy toward a table at the rear of the building.

"Come on; sit down; I want to talk to you."

"It's better that you talked to the judge," suggested the stiff McAndrews.

"No. That's something else. Sit down."

McAndrews finally gave him a thoughtful nod of acceptance, and they gathered at the oilcloth-covered table, officer and fugitive, ordering modest drinks from an evil-eyed waiter with a waxed mustache, who plainly detested them both. The young cattle rustler gazed quizzically into the sober blue eyes of McAndrews and then drew forth an old-fashioned gold watch, snapping the case open as he laid it on the table, though he held his cupped hands around it lest the glint of gold tempt too many other persons.

"My wife," he explained. "And the kid."

McANDREWS glanced down at the pictures on the watch-case, a plain blonde woman and a pretty girl-baby.

"Well?"

"That's the whole story." Wayman shut the watch and returned it to his pocket. "Have you got any kids?"

"Four."

"Four. I'll bet they cost you something, don't they?"

McAndrews squirmed. "Yes, they cost. They take all my salary."

Wayman nodded. "You'll understand, then. The kid was sick. Spinal trouble. A long drag. I used to rustle a few cows before I married and settled down, but I thought my wild days were over. But my ranch didn't pay very well, so when the bills snowed me under——"

McAndrews held up a peremptory hand.

"None o' that!" he cut in, with exaggerated curtness. "I'm only doin' me duty. Besides, judges are not heartless."

"No, but Senator John Rufus Larkin is," reminded the rustler bitterly. "He'd have me crucified. He's got the power. He can even crack the whip over the judges!"

McAndrews sat back, nodding.

"A hard man, Senator Larkin. Aye, he talks of Abraham Lincoln in his Fourth of

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July speeches, but God help Lincoln had he met Senator Larkin! A hard man. How well I know it!"

"That's just it," insisted Wayman. "I should have tackled someone else's herd; not his. Then I could go in and take my medicine. I could stand it. I'd get a little mercy. But now?" He waved his hand toward the crowd in the blue smoke. "I've got to take my chances among these cutthroats till I can find an opening. You don't have to. You'd better skip. When you get back home, tell 'em what I told you. It might help me a little, maybe."

McAndrews sat back more solidly.

"I'll wait for you."

Wayman almost jumped up from the table.

"No! Do you think you're safe here?"

"Oh, no doubt some of them will recognize me, if they haven't already." McAndrews cast a speculative eye down the hall. "Yonder's Johnny Scrimm, I see. Burglary, ten years. He'll know me. Then there's others. Eh, they're tough outwardly, no doubt."

"Don't you ever feel fear?" wondered Wayman.

"I've done wrong to no man," explained McAndrews simply. "Why should I go about with fear in me heart?"

Wayman shook his puzzled head.

"It's brave but dumb. You're asleep. Oh, well; I'm not your keeper. Still——Hello, now what?"

A yellow haired American crook and a swarthy Mexican rascal had started a fierce wresting match in front of the bar, the climax to a loud dispute which had jangled even through the racket of the automatic piano. Every head turned toward the fighters. The music ceased. Chairs scraped backward at the table. McAndrews and Wayman arose also. McAndrews, looking over bobbing heads, saw the pair battling on even terms until another American slipped up behind the Mexican, whirling a chair down on his head.

THERE was a snarling roar from the crowd. Its undertone of hatred grew more ominous until the air seemed to crackle with it.

The painted women at the front of the house disappeared magically. A high-pitched voice howled curses in rapid-fire Spanish, answered by another fierce growl from the mob. The voice screamed something about "Gringos!" Then a yelling horde of dark forms closed in upon the contestants. Knife-blades flickered under the hanging lamps. There were smashing, crashing noises; a cry of pain; American profanity; a thud.

"That's dangerous!" said Wayman nervously. "They hate us anyhow, nowadays. It's the bums on both sides. Hooch, propaganda, politicians, bad tempers——"

A shot thundered through the crowd. Someone screamed.

Another shot exploded among the surging bodies and moving heads. Heavy white smoke drifted upward, floating through the bluer tobacco smoke.

The mob gave way in sudden panic, gibbering words of alarm. Feet pattered, chairs went backward, tables overturned, window glass crashed, bottles and glasses burst on the floor as the crowd rushed for shelter. Some of them dived under tables; some hid behind posts, and some ranged themselves along the walls, leaving the two rat-faced American crooks standing in front of the bar, leaning forward alertly with pistols in their hands.

For a moment the room was absolutely silent. The mob hesitated between peace and war. Then a swarthy black-mustached idiot came upon his toes, drew a long breath, waved his arms, and screamed out a sizzling harangue with such wild invective that the mob snarled, roared, gathered its muscles, reached for its knives and firearms, and surged forward to tear these hateful white-faced aliens apart.

McAndrews heard the orator advising the crowd to "muerte" the "Gringos," but that was about all he had time to understand. Things happened too quickly.

His nearer neighbors picked him for their victim. Hot eyes glared at him. Snarl-

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ing lips were bared, showing white teeth. Fierce epithets spat in his face. Agile bodies leaped upon him, amid a whirling inferno of pistol shots, screams, flashing knives, crashing furniture and wild yells. McAndrews observed that Wayman had his six-shooter out. McAndrews would have done likewise, but first he had to hurl a wild eyed assailant over his shoulder and then bounce his face on the table till the table fell apart.

When McAndrews looked up from his job there was a clear space around him. Wayman had been shooting. So had the others. They were still at it. The place was blinking and reeling with thunderous explosions.

Suddenly Wayman fell toward him.

McAndrews, tugging at his pistol, was horrified to see that a bullet had plowed a red furrow across Wayman's forehead. McAndrews's left arm went under his shoulders, pulling him up, just as a stamping, yelling dozen of overwhelmed American rascals rushed down the center of the hall like a football team plunging through the line.

"The back door!" panted one of them to McAndrews. "There's too many up in front!"

A blast of flame leaped across the front of McAndrews's sandy mustache, causing him to shoot frantically toward the right at this new enemy; and then, not waiting to see the result, he lifted the young cattle rustler over his shoulder, caught up with the swearing American riff-raff who were jammed in the rear doorway, plowed his way through them, and emerged in a clear space under dark trees while rabid Mexicans rushed out of the front of the building, sending excited pistol shots down the line of its walls.

"Hit fer the hills!" yelped someone near McAndrews. "We can't reach the road! We're blocked!"

McANDREWS staggered uphill with them. His burden, who had returned to consciousness, began squirming off his shoulder toward the ground.

"I'm all right," whispered Wayman unsteadily. "It was just a scratch. Where do we go from here?"

"Yonder, I guess. Come on."

"You mean, you're going to stay with this crowd? You?"

"Aye. The Mexicans might shoot first and learn me errand too late. I'll stay with these others. They're not moral, but it's safer!"

They scrambled up the dark slope northward of the cantina, struggling through brush and roots which tripped them constantly while they tried to shoot back at the pistol flashes which were advancing from the building. But these became fewer. There were other sounds from down there which indicated that the pursuers were mounting their horses. Hoofs began to clatter on the hard ground.

"We gotta keep in a bunch!" advised a terrified crook near McAndrews, when they reached the top of the hill. "Otherwise we're gone gooses!"

"We oughta scatter," suggested another querulous voice.

"Nix! Nix! They'd ride us down! Keep together!"

"You wanna watch out," warned a deeper voice, referring to McAndrews. "We've got a bull amongst us!"

"To hell with 'im!" snarled the querulous one. "We've got other troubles! Let's beat it!"

Huddled together, with McAndrews and Wayman tagging along, they went down the other side of the hill, commencing a retreat which became a drama of human desperation. Outnumbered, outflanked, beset by sardonic horsemen, without food or water, without much morale, they held off their circling enemies during a night of grief and confusion, emerging at dawn on the top of a hillock where, with white faces and bandaged heads, they could see their jeering enemies gathering in greater strength in every direction. Luckily for the crooks they were well armed.

The horsemen, having sport with this little band of undesirables, rode around them, threatened them, kept them dodging bullets, herded them into tight corners, and occasionally, when the circumstances permitted, shouted vile personal epithets which were usually about 100 per cent. true; yet the haggard, thirsty little crowd of thirteen bedeviled northerners managed to hold

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their tormentors off during a frantic, blistering morning while traveling in a zigzag course from hillock to hillock.

"They're not very good shots," remarked the perspiring Wayman, with McAndrews's red bandanna tied around his forehead. "We may get away. They can't hit us——"

He stepped three paces backward. He gulped for breath, clutching at his chest while his knees wobbled under him. His face turned white as a sheet.

"They did!" he gasped. "Accident——"

McAndrews's left arm grabbed him as he collapsed. Wayman's agonized eyes fluttered. Red froth came to his lips.

DEAD? Eh? No!" McAndrews laid him down, examined the wound quickly, and looked up into the worried eyes of a little blond burglar who had lost his nerve.

"We gotta leave him, see?" gibbered the burglar. "Yeh. He'll croak sure. We gotta leave him. Yeh."

"Leave him?" roared McAndrews. "Not while he still lives, man!"

"But we gotta go! We gotta beat it! See them other greasers comin' up from the south? We gotta skip!"

"Skip, then," grunted McAndrews, as he lifted Wayman in his powerful arms. "I'm stayin' by me man."

"But you can't stand off them guys!"

"No. We'll stay together. We'll save him. March on!"

They staggered along during a demoniac afternoon, fighting with tongues hanging out while they struggled wildly over brush, rocks and merciless hot sand. The red-faced McAndrews, towering above them all, carried his burden as one would carry a little child, pausing frequently to rest and to empty a pistol at taunting enemies who would never come quite close enough. One member of the little band got a bullet between his eyes. The rest of them took a look at the silent figure and then struggled onward hastily with nerves shaken.

Wayman, eternally fighting for breath, began to babble; but sometimes he had lucid intervals.

"Not jail, Mac!" he whimpered once into McAndrews's ears. "Not that, Mac!"

"It's me duty," growled McAndrews.

"But it's not legal, Mac. You're taking me out of Mexico! Hauling me out by force!"

McAndrews considered this problem for thirty steps.

"But I can't leave you here," he argued stubbornly. "No. That would be murder. But ye've got me puzzled!"

"But you couldn't take me to jail when you carried me across the Line, Mac! No! You couldn't do that!"

"Couldn't I? I dunno."

"But it isn't legal!"

Then Wayman's mind wandered, coming back to the subject insistently while McAndrews was trying to carry him up a shale-rock hillside.

"You wouldn't let them get me, Mac! You wouldn't turn me over to Larkin! My God, no!"

"But I've got to do me duty!" snarled the goaded McAndrews, remembering his pledge to the sheriff. "Could I let you go?"

"But you're hauling me out of Mexico! There's no extradition!"

"Let be!" sobbed McAndrews. "You're torturin' me. You're turnin' my brain around. Let be!"

BUT later, toward evening, when the little band had driven their tormentors away from a brackish spring of water in a slump of mesquite, the cattle rustler resumed the topic with feverish persistence while McAndrews bathed his wound. The rest of the crowd was splashing in the pool, raving over its delights. Wayman's weak voice babbled: "Mary! Mary! The baby's whimpering again! Wake up!" He driveled some more with his head on McAndrews's mighty knee. Then: "Oh. You're bringing me home, Mac? It's only a few miles north of the boundary."

McAndrews was silent, helpless, baffled.

"Not Larkin!" appealed Wayman, pite-

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ously, trying to sit up. "No! You wouldn't do that, Mac!"

"I—I'd hardly give a dog over to Larkin's mercy," admitted McAndrews slowly.

"Take me home, then. Not to jail, Mac. No. You wouldn't do that. You've got a wife. You've got babies——"

"Let be!" commanded McAndrews.

"Promise me, then."

McAndrews was silent.

"You've said you'd wronged no man, Mac! You haven't carried me this far just to ruin me!" The man began to cough. His body was racked by it, but he drew in a long, stubborn breath. "Promise me! Promise me!"

"Maybe; I don't know," evaded the desperate McAndrews, bathing the red lips while his hand trembled. "Be still, now. Be easy. Yonder comes some more Mexicans. I'll be needin' all me wits. Take a rest. We'll be home soon, now, never fear!"

"It's a promise!" croaked Wayman.

"No!" pleaded McAndrews. "Not exactly. Eh, you're tearin' me heart apart!"

"But you wouldn't give me to Larkin, Mac! I'd get twenty years for ten calves. I can restore—— But not jail, Mac! Not that!"

"Maybe not; I'll see," soothed McAndrews. "I'll think it over. Rest, now. They've started shootin' again."

But Wayman kept it up. There were periods of delirium and periods of silent exhaustion, yet the weakening Wayman wore down McAndrews's resistance until the big deputy's agonized soul was torn

by two opposing viewpoints, each arraigning the other. Then Wayman ceased pleading. His voice became low, tired, monotonous, indifferent.

"I'm going home," he whispered that night, when the rest of the crowd lay entrenched behind some boulders on a greasewood hillside while enemies still skulked nearby. "Larkin loses. You all lose. Even you, Mac. Part of you. You've got a good heart, Mac; it's your head that harms you." Wayman coughed weakly. "My watch, Mac. for her. Tell her—tell her the baby's feverish—and we've gone north for calves with Mexicans and Larkin and the doctor's bills—and every one of them crooked but a damned fool deputy sheriff ——" Wayman sighed. Only a thread of his life remained.

"Boy! Boy!" sobbed McAndrews. "I don't want to lose you this way! No! Better to promise——"

BUT the silence was broken only by the heavy breathing of a heartsick deputy. Then from around the nearer rock came a querulous voice: "Do we bump off the bull?"

"Naw," retorted another. "Waffor?"

"But we don't want *him* around."

"He's a pack-animal, see? What's the use o' croakin' a good mule? He may save that guy yet. Wait till we get outa here. Then we'll see about it."

McAndrews's head came up. He began consciously to realize the natural hostility of this crowd toward him, which he had realized subconsciously all the time. There had been no treachery against him; all of them were fugitives alike, and even rogues could sympathize with a man shot through the lungs; but now that the end was approaching fast, McAndrews's slow but methodical brain began to appreciate what might happen to him.

But Wayman still lived. The others were going onward, so McAndrews lifted the quiet burden and lurched along with the rest until their wounds and exhaustion soon caused them to halt on another rocky hill.

McAndrews laid down his burden gently. This time it was unresponsive to any treatment. McAndrews, kneeling over the man, staggered slowly to his feet, with a little sigh. From far away came the sound of occasional shots. Nearer, a voice arose from the other side of a rock alongside him.

"We must be over the line, ain't we?"

"I dunno. Are we?"

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"Hell, I hope not!"

McAndrews stood tensely while the truth trickled into his muddled mind. These fugitives had made their zigzag course toward their own country, as surely as a homing-pigeon flies for its cote. Perhaps they had done it deliberately or perhaps only a few of them knew it. Perhaps the location of the Cantina Los Amigos had caused them to start in this direction, but now they were here and they didn't quite approve of it.

"But we can't go back down there!" argued the querulous one.

"But I don't want no Border Patrol to find *me* here! Not me!"

"Well," demanded another, "wot are you goin' to do, then?"

McAndrews, stiffly militant, stalked around the corner of the rock, holding a big six-shooter whose barrel glinted in the starlight. That same starlight was just bright enough to reveal the dark forms of every member of the crowd to his vigilant eyes.

"You're goin' to Empire City," he announced, in a voice made sterner because of the grief which gripped his soul. "I didn't bring ye to the line, but now that you're here, ye'll stay here!"

There was a ghastly silence. He could hear the hissing of indrawn breaths. Then one of them made a swift motion.

"Like hell we will——"

McAndrews's forty-five blazed at him. Pebbles scattered as the victim writhed to the ground. Then there was no other sound.

"Stand up with your hands in air!" commanded McAndrews.

They obeyed. He went behind them and disarmed them, one by one.

"Now start forward, all of ye. Carry yonder rogue between you. March!"

THE shuffling procession, vocally bitter but physically unable to do anything about it, plodded along rebelliously until, shortly after midnight, the gaunt and haggard McAndrews herded his tattered, battered sleep-walkers up to the Ten Eyck ranch near the border, where he awakened the owners, arranged for auto-transportation to Empire City under guard of several well armed Ten Eyck punchers, and promptly fell asleep.

The motor-trucks arrived at the court house at dawn. The prisoners were given quarters by an astonished jailor. McAndrews staggered into the office, where he resumed his nap in the sheriff's swivel-chair. The sheriff came down at eight o'clock, as usual. His footfalls aroused McAndrews, who lurched to a sitting posture as his boss stamped across the threshold.

"Hello! You back?" exclaimed the sheriff. "Four days before election?"

McAndrews nodded solemnly.

"Well? Did you get your man? Is he here?"

McAndrews nodded a negative. The sheriff's retort was like a whiplash:

"Failed, eh?"

"No." McAndrews supported himself by the desk as he came to his feet. "Failed, eh? Come. I'll show you." He reeled to the rear of the back room, where the turnkey sat behind the steel bars of the jail entrance. "Open up, Mike. Show him!"

With an ominous scowl, the sheriff stepped into the jail. He halted, with mouth open, gazing around at McAndrews's collection until he began to recognize some of its individual members.

"Joe Gallegher, yegg! Micky McClung, forger! Hymie Goldstein, the con man! Johnny Scrimm, burglar! Most of last year's jail-breakers! Great Scott, look at 'em! Pete Rodriguez, arson; Jesus Martinez, wife-beater; Dicky the Nut, assault with a deadly weapon! What a haul! What

a haul! Wow! There's a fellow, yonder, that they're looking for in California! What a haul! One of 'em in the hospital-cell? Nose shot off? Fine! Great! What a haul! Great Scott! How did you do it? Beat 'em up? They look as if they'd been in a hamburger-machine!"

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"It was the Mexicans," reported the unhumorous McAndrews. "The Mexicans disliked them. Not that I'm blamin' the Mexicans."

"Mexico, eh? Come into the office. Tell me about it. Everything. But where's Wayman?"

McAndrews took the gold watch out of his pocket.

"He's met a Judge that even Senator Larkin can't crack the whip over," reported McAndrews, somewhat bitterly. "This is for his wife. Eh, I liked the boy. But now——"

"Too bad," said the sheriff, with a swift nod, as he glanced at the pictures on the watch-case. "But come inside. Tell me all of it."

McAndrews told him. Then McAndrews had to tell the newspaper men. By evening he found himself the hero of the town. The newspapers shrieked his praises. The Mayor and the Board of Supervisors turned the sheriff's office into a reception room. Best of all, the spectacled, baldheaded political boss of the town beamed with approval.

"This probably carries the election," chortled the boss to the sheriff and McAndrews, after all the others had left. "McAndrews, you're a wonder!"

MIGHTY lucky," agreed the sheriff, with a thoughtful nod. "Used good sense, too. If it wasn't that Mac is so slow, I'd be tempted to make him my chief deputy right now!"

"Why not?" snapped the boss. "That would make the election a landslide!"

"As how?" inquired the sheriff.

"You ride on the wave of public approval. You get in on the publicity. What if McAndrews is slow and gruff? He's incorruptible; unapproachable; does his duty without fear or favor. It's good hokum for the voters. They'll eat him up. Honest Jim McAndrews, appointed Chief Deputy Sheriff! You can't beat it! And it's all true at that, ain't it?"

"Yeh," agreed the sheriff. "That settles it. You're it, Mac."

McAndrews nodded gratefully but his eyes were looking out of the window toward the Salvation Army barracks.

"It's a fine promotion and I'm thankful," he admitted slowly, "but I'm thinkin' that I may have won it under false pretenses, in a way."

"How's that, Mac?"

"I'm rememberin' the poor lad that paid for it all. I might have run him in, but I have me doubts. We're all human, Sheriff. I'm thinkin' I'd have let him go!"

In the Next Issue

A Couple of Gambles with Life and Death —East and West

Seven Sticks Gamblers

By

ERNEST HAYCOX

Private Property

By

W. WIRT

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RING GODS

By JOHN GOTSHALL

Author of "The Elusive Stake," "Winner Take All," etc.

THE STORY OF A LAD WHO COULD DRAPE THE CURSE OF TEN OVER ALL THE WELTERS AND MIDDLEWEIGHTS WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI, BUT WHO STAYED AWAY FROM THE EAST—TILL A CERTAIN HISTORY MAKING NIGHT IN MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

WHAT! You won't fight the champeen?"

Kid Miller, sittin' on the edge of the bed in his room in a Denver hotel, don't pay no more attention to this barrage than he would be a twelve ounce glove swung by a flyweight. An' me standin' there, word groggy, as you might say, a telegram twitchin' in my hand sayin', "yes," to a challenge I'd just flung at Billy Slater, the welterweight king. There was also another wire from Ben Taylor offering us fifteen thousand berries if we'd cross gloves with Billy in a ten round argument in the Garden!

"Huh?" I says, though The Kid ain't said nothin'.

He don't answer that either, just sits there sort of fussin' with a shoe lace he'd been pesterin' with when I come bustin' in after pickin' up the telegrams at the clerk's desk.

Lookin' at him, I goes goofy in the lamps for a spell but when I finally gets a focus on him again he's still sittin' there sort of shakin' that yellow haired head of his'n, and his map of Ireland face is wearin' a expression like he's just got a bid to fill in at a wake.

"Listen!" I says, tears in my voice. "It's duck soup, Kid! Billy Slater's ready for the scrap heap. He's held the belt six years now, and it's first come first served. He's old, that baby—thirty-one! You can coup the title off'n him in three rounds."

The kid gets up at that, crosses to the window and stares out over the city at the snow capped mountains.

"Nope," he says, and then after a bit—"You see, Fat, I ain't lookin' for a scrap with Billy Slater."

Just that way he slips the glad tidings—an' me layin' awake nights dreamin' about some day managing a champeen!

"But gosh, Kid!" I wheezes. "Here's the chance of a lifetime. I seen it coming eighteen months ago when I picked you outa a ham an' egg bout on the two-bit time in Pueblo! Didn't I tell you right then that outside of Muggsy McCan they wasn't a glove between you and the welter belt? Didn't I—and now ain't I right?"

He just stares out the window, them imp-touched blue eyes of his'n dull as the paint on a last year car an' his uppish point of a nose sort of droopin', almost.

"Billy can keep the belt—for all of me," he finally says.

"Keep it? Preest! Look at these here

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wires—fifteen thousand smackers. And with the title tucked under our arm we can go right through the welter like a canvas back duck down wind—excepting maybe for Muggsy McCan, an' we can side-step him for a year or two."

Still he don't counter, don't even dodge!

"What's the matter?" I shoots. "Scared of old Billy Slater?"

That gets him. He turns, and they's a sort of hurt look way back in his eyes, though he's smilin'—whimsical, tolerant like.

"You know that ain't the reason, Fat," he says an' his voice is soft—that is, soft for a fire-eatin', two-fisted, hell-bustin' bozo what would rather fight than eat.

"Then what the Sam Hill is the reason?" I snaps. "If you won't fight the champ I got a right to know why." Preest! But I was mad.

He turns back to the window but after a minute he looks at me and his eyes is misty, feverish.

"I never told you, Fat," he says, "but—you see, Billy Slater—he—he's my older brother."

"What?" Things in my dome starts whirling what I didn't even know was there. "You—you ain't Ol' Irish Slater's son—not *Young Kid Slater?*"

"I—" he hesitates, then comes out with it— "I *was*," he said, and turns back toward the mountains.

"Not *The Yellow Kid!*" I marvels, not realizing I'm speaking out loud.

He nods, and my mind streaks back over the years—six of 'em. Lookin' at Kid Miller now, I figgers I musta been plumb canary never to have suspected it before. He's just a little bit heavier now, maybe five or six pounds—more mature. But there's the same general build, that same smile—straight from the heart; that same look—like his father, his brother—the look of champeens!

SIX years. Judas! He was just a lad of sixteen then. It seemed just like yesterday; the old Sportsman's Athletic club arena back in New York, just a step off'n lower Broadway. The smoke hung gray, centering in layers under the domed lights over the ring. The place is packed to the guards—there's a reason! Young Kid Slater has come out of the sticks, Jersey and up-state where he did his prelim stuff, and is makin' his debut as a main eventer.

He's the kid brother of Bill Slater what had just copped the welter crown. Old Irish Slater, what lifted the Emerald Isle title with his raw 'uns back in the old pre-glove days, is the dad of both of 'em, so it's no wonder the customers has paid cash, thousands of 'em—willingly! They're takin' it for granted the lad's a hell slasher and they want to be able to say they seen him cut loose in his first main event.

But somehow a wrench gets into the machinery. In the middle of the third round Young Kid Slater's layin' there on the canvas in the middle of the ring! And the last I seen as the customers filed out he was still crumpled there, cries of "yellow" washin' over him like a tidal wave. And nobody has heard of him since!

I stares at Kid Miller standing there by the window lookin' out at the mountains. It's him, no mistake! Though it's hard to connect this wild-cat that the Western fans is nuts about with Yellow Kid Slater which the folks used to say busted his old dad's heart that night, six years ago. The old man aged ten years that night in as many seconds, folks said, and I knowed he did, 'cause I seen him.

"Kid," I says, crossin' over to him there by the window, "I was there in the old Sportsman's Athletic club arena that night—I seen it all from ring-side."

He flashed around——

"You—seen it."

"Yes, but—what in heaven's name was the matter with ya? Why didn't ya fight?"

He swallows at his Adam's apple. "Couldn't," he says.

"Couldn't!"

He nods. "Remember when Dugan and me was clinched an' fell through the ropes onto the press table?" He was lookin' at me with his heart in his eyes, scared, I guess, that I don't remember, but I do.

"Yea," I says, "but——"

He rolls up his right shirt sleeve.

"Maybe you've noticed this knob on my arm, just above the wrist?" He shows it to me, though I knows it by heart but never thought much about it. "Busted it

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there that night," he said. "Busted it when we fell. Tried to use it after I got back into the ring, but—I—guess I finally fainted. It—hurt."

"Preest!" I takes hold of his shoulder an' looks at him. "but Kid! Why didn't you pipe the news an' stop the fight?"

He studies this a bit. "Don't just know," he decides. "But you see I was only sixteen—an' green. An' then dad, he was set on me winnin' and I—well, I didn't want to disappoint him."

His hands gripped my arms, nervous. "I guess the old man's never been the same since—so I hear. He was a proud un, Fat, and it—it busted him—inside."

"You've never seen him since?"

"Nope—you see, he told me that night—said I wasn't no son of his'n, said he never wanted to see me again."

I mops my dome, thinking.

"But Judas Preest!" I says. "Why didn't you tell what happened later. Then the sports writers would have got it and——"

Kid Miller stops me with a shake of the head and a sort of strange look, one of them looks that sort of puts you in your place.

"The Slaters," he says, "wasn't never much on alibis." And with that he turns back to the window.

It don't seem no place for me just then so I tiptoes for the door, but he stops me.

"Just a minute, Fat," he says and goes to fishing around in the bottom of one of his trunks. After a bit he finds what he's lookin' for.

"Here's my copy of our contract," he says. "The big time show in the East ain't for me, Fat. I gotta stick out here in the semi-sage brush. Some one'd be sure to recognize me, back home, and dad, he's ——" his voice trails off into nothing.

I nods, not knowin' nothing else appropriate.

"So I ain't holdin' you to the contract," he says shoving the copy of it my way, "I know you been aiming for years to manage a champeen, Fat, and I—I——aw, hell! You go out and pick yourself another likely lookin' lad and prime him for a belt. I——"

"Another likely lookin' lad, your auntie!" I gulped, shoving the contract back at him. "Managin' a Slater's plenty good enough for Fat Reynolds—even if we don't tell the world about it!"

SO THAT was that and me and The Kid goes for another year drapin' the curse of ten over all the welters and middleweights we can coax west of the Mississippi. You see The Kid's twenty-three now and he's about getting his size. A hundred and forty-seven is the welter limit and most generally we has to take off a pound or two when we have to make it, so I runs him once in a while against a middleweight puttin' him in the ring at about a hundred and fifty-one or two so's not to weaken him by too much weight making. Taking things gradual this way we can fight in either weight class, though The Kid won't never be a middleweight star—too short for them babies. They usually has too much reach on him.

But the game we play is a good racket and we takes in a bundle of frog skins bustin' these venturesome bozos on the snozzle. Of course, I'm groggy half the time trying to keep from up and telling the world just exactly who this flash of mine is, but I manages to keep the secret, though I'm expecting some thumb-knocker to guess it any time. But nobody does—and then one night in The Garden back in New York Muggsy McCan, the yellow rat, shoots a low one the referee don't see and cops the welter crown from Billy Slater slicker'n a whistle.

They's about twenty-five thousand peeved customers bellows "foul" at the top of their lungs—me and The Kid hears 'em over the air from a radio set in an Albuquerque hotel— but the referee goes right on countin'.

The old champ don't come to for half an hour. When he does the sport writers ask him if he's going to claim the foul and appeal the decision to the commission.

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"Appeal?" he says looking 'em straight in the eye. "Appeal, hell! I'm goin' to get that frosty dogged onion back into the ring and make him wish he'd took a double dose of poison or been bit by a rattler so's he could have a peaceful ending."

The Kid's most crazy over the damp break his brother gets, but he feels Billy'll slap this shifty hittin' bird to sleep the minute he catches him alone in the ring again so he gradually cheers up—but the fact of the case is that while the whole sport world is happy trying to kid itself into thinking this very thing, deep down most every one in on the know realizes the old champ has shot his wad. He's thirty-two now—and he's been fightin' ever since he could hold up a pair of mitts.

But the talk goes on and finally the papers is signed and everything is set for the return bout, when the boxing physician steps in and takes a hand. Doc Peters, I knows him well, he looks Billy over through a stethascope and the tears begin running down his cheeks—the old champ is done! That fighting heart what's been carrying him through to victory over younger men the last few years long after his aging muscles has almost ceased to function has finally cracked under the strain. Valvular trouble, Doc says.

So that's that and the next day the sport writers, lumps in their throats bigger'n fourteen ounce training gloves, splashes out columns of heart throbs of their own—it's the passing, they says, of the last of the *Fighting Slaters!*

THEY writes their way through pages of stuff about Billy and his dad, Old Irish Slater what had been a welterweight dose of poison to the heavyweights back in them days when pugs spent most of their training periods pickling their knuckles so's to make 'em nice and horny. They even wrote about Old Irish's dad, Gentleman Jerry, who had quit a good doctor's practice in Dublin to follow the prize ring and who was credited by the fancy with more knock-outs than any other boxer what ever lived.

They revives the old legend that he, being a physician, had doped out a punch what had the bust on the point of the chin beat a mile as an anesthetic—and how he had handed the secret down to Old Irish—and him down to Billy.

It was great sob stuff them sport writers spills. *Ring Gods,* they calls the Fighting Slaters—and they wasn't a one of them writers low lifed enough to mention the family, Young Kid Slater—the yellow Kid, what had been the first and only blot in three generations.

The sport fans eats it all up—expecting Kid Miller.

The morning the papers comes out with the splurge, I find The Kid sittin' alone in his room in his hotel at Spokane where we'd been takin' the measure of half a dozen leather pushers what thought they was the big thrill in the fight racket.

Surrounded by newspapers turned to the sport sections, The Kid looks up at me and his eyes is red, bleary.

"Billy—Billy's done, Fat!" he gulps. "They say he—can't fight no more." There's a sort of awed catch in his voice and his face is white.

I nods, chewin' hard at a dry cigar. The Kid jumps up, sudden. He grabs both my arms——

"But, Fat!" he cries. "Muggsy fouled him—fouled him! An' now Billy won't get a chance to whip hell out of the skunk! They'd ought to give him a chance—one chance!"

I quiets him for a bit and he sits down, but he happens to see the heading on one of them stories again.

"See?" he pipes up. "See what they say about Billy bein' the last of the *Fightin' Slaters?"* His lower lip trembles.

"Yea, I——"

His face goes red.

"Fat," he says, "I'm gona show that bird! I'm gona show Muggsy McCan that Billy ain't the last of 'em—not by a damn sight!"

"Now listen," I soothes, "this here ain't——"

"You don't think he'll fight me?"

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"It ain't that. I can get the bout for you, as Kid Miller, but——"

"That's okay with me—any name. He'll find out who I am *later!*"

I tries to hedge.

"But you see——"

"See what?"

"Well, the cards ain't stacked just right for you, Kid. He—he's the only welter in the world as can do it, but I've seen Muggsy McCan in action plenty, Kid, and he's a tough hombre and cagey with his body punches. He wins—one way or another—every time! I'm scared he'll just naturally beat the tar outa you and that——"

He grabs my arms an' looks at me, sober as a judge.

"Not in this scrap he won't, Fat—not in *this* one."

AND danged if I don't half believe him! But my mind skids back over the years—back to Old Irish Slater, the boy's dad, and that tragic night in the old Sportsman's Athletic club arena when the jeers of the fans and the cries of "yellow" splash over The Kid like a stream from a fire hose.

"You'll—you want to fight him, even in New York?"

"Anywhere," he shoots back. "Even in New York."

I get something of what's going on inside of him and nods. And the next day Muggsy McCan, figgerin' Kid Miller a set-up, accepts the challenge.

So The Kid and me slips into New York and I selects the Hudson gym for training quarters, figgerin' the three hour motor ride up the river will discourage sporting writers and fans.

But it's a bum steer—especially as far as the sport writers goes. The first day a couple of 'em drifts in and the next day the gym is packed. Those as didn't have unlimited expense accounts mooched rides off'n them that did.

Somehow The Kid hits 'em all right between the lamps. They figgers he's the big thrill as a welter contender and the next day they lets the world in on it. They sets up a ballyhoo that turns the heavyweight champ green with envy. You see it's thumbs down in the sport world on Muggsy McCan and these babies is willing to go the publicity limit with a bozo what looks like he could cop.

Things is going along all Jake the first week and then one afternoon the clouds begins to gather. Spud Hendricks, an old side-kick of mine, tips me the wise-eye.

"Slim Rassey's among those present this afternoon," he says. "He's Muggsy McCan's manager and I can tell by the way his pan is sagging he ain't what you'd call tickled to death with the way The Kid is bouncing gloves off'n them sparring partners of his'n."

"Where is he?" I pipes.

"Over there," he says, but when he goes to point him out, he's gone. A minute later we lamps him slipping through the gate and climbing into his taxi.

"Play 'em close to your shirt studs," Spud tips me off. "That baby's so crooked he rolls loaded dice straight. Of course he's hep now to the fact The Kid's wide open for a left to the bread-basket, Muggsy's favorite wallop—an' he shoots 'em plenty low when he gets a chance—but I can see he don't like this boy's racket any more'n a case of hives. You keep your eyes peeled or he'll singe your winkers. They's a damp break comin' from that baby."

I DON'T say nothing to The Kid about what's worrying me and after a while it begins to look like one of them pre-crossed bridges. Things goes along fine, The Kid not even having any trouble keeping under the welterweight limit. I dopes this is due to the change of climate and altitude, folks generally either taking on or losing a few pounds when they make a change from what they're used to.

The sport writers by this time is giving The Kid about a 40-60 chance to lift the title, the only thing they figgers being in his way is him playing wide open to a left to the stomach, Muggsy's hole card when it comes to punches.

The lad's in fine spirits, considering what's eatin' him—the daily dread or running into his dad before he's ready. Then

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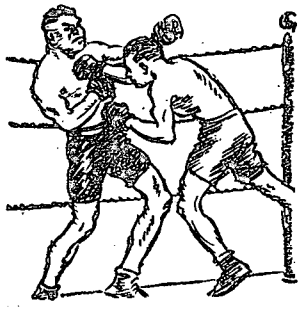
just about the time he's all set that this ain't going to happen, it does!



It's a Thursday afternoon, which is private training time for him, and he's stepping lively with his sparring partners when I hears a ballyhoo at the gym door—and there's Old Irish Slater and Billy, The Kid's brother!

Say! Them coming in that way to see The Kid you couldn't have bought my spirits for a mint! I figgers the old man's doped out just who Kid Miller is and that bygones is going to be bygones an' he's here to invite us to eat the fatted calf. The Kid ain't lamped his dad yet and I rushes over to meet him. I'd knowed him kinda well, years back and Billy some.

"Howdy!" I chirps, giving Old Irish the happy mitt. "Been sort of expectin' you folks would turn up."

His old face, round and pink as a baby's ripples. The Slater smile, a breeze right off the Blarney stone. He says maybe I knows Billy and I says I does and stand lookin' at 'em for a minute. They're as like as two boxing gloves except for age. Short, stocky and with that cat-quick but majestic movement like them old Greek gods was said to have—just like The Kid, down there in the ring workin' out. He's sure a third to this pair of Slaters—pick 'em a mile off!

"He's a great boy!" I bubbles, sort of runnin' over.

"So I hear, so I hear," Old Irish comes back. "Never seen Kid Miller, though," he adds, "but Billy an' me is for him an' hearin' he's a bit open for a left to the belt we come down to look him over."

"Maybe we can work out a counter for him," Billy cuts in. "I know just how McCan shoots 'em." With that he starts walking down the long gym toward the ring. "Which is Kid Miller?" he asks.

"Has his back to us."

"He's fast—cripes, but he's fast!" the old man cracks. "Sort of like you was, Billy—same build and style."

Billy nods. "Family resemblance," I grins.

"What say?" Irish asks, puzzled.

I looks at him pop eyed, then the goose flesh skids right up from the knees as I gets a flash of instinct—they don't know The Kid! Preest! The old sweat pops out on my forehead like dew on a squash. I tries to stop 'em from gettin' closer to the ring, but flivvers.

T[illegible] just as The Kid changes pace and starts to face us, the bell rings and he climbs out of the ring. I'm prayin' Lefty O'Brien, head trainer, will scoot him straight to his dressing room, but he don't. The Kid turns around so's Lefty can drape a bathrobe over him—and there they are, the two of 'em face to face and not twenty feet apart!

The Kid is first to shake out of the shock.

"Dad!" he cries, beaming, "Why, Dad!" And with that he breezes over to the old man, arms out-stretched like he's going to put on a huddle.

BUT Old Irish stands like a statue—steel-cast. Then all of a sudden he busts into life.

"How—how in hell did *you* get here?" He barks, face gray-white and his jaw shoved out like a pit bull.

The Kid reels like he's took a hot one on the point of the chin.

"Why, Dad! I——"

"Don't *dad* me!" The old man bellows. "What to hell does this mean?" he screams, turning to me.

I tries to explain but don't land one in five swings. He ain't even listenin'.

"Masquerading in a good man's shoes, eh?" he spouts, turning back to Kid Miller. "Just like you!"

The Kid don't flinch.

"I'm in my own shoes," he finally says and turns hurt, appealing, eyes to his brother.

Billy 's face lights up.

"Kid!" He says." It's been seven years, but I'd have knowd you anywhere!" And with that he steps up, hands outstretched.

"None of that!" Old Irish snaps, jerkin' him back. "We're not killin' no fatted calves for the likes of him!" And with that he turns away, pulling, shovin' Billy with him.

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But after a few steps, he flashes around. "I don't just get this," he says, pointing a finger at The Kid. "But what I said that night in the Sportsman's Athletic club arena years ago ain't been forgot, and I'm saying it again—now!"

"But——"

"And another thing," the old man cuts in, drawing himself up proud, "be mighty careful you don't use the name *Slater!* Billy and me has took pretty good care of it in our day, and I'm not aimin' for you to drag it around in the dirt again—get me?"

Kid Miller stands there, silent for a bit, then a pathetic, hopeless little smile tilts one corner of his mouth.

"Yes, I get you—Dad," he says, and turning away goes to his dressing room and closes the door.

THE old man don't say a word, but after a bit he grunts, and takin' Billy by the arm, heads for the gate.

For a minute I gawks, a regular open-face Charley. Then I gets hep to myself and I'm peeved to the gills at the damp break The Kid's gettin'. I hot-foots it after 'em.

"Say!" I says, grabbin' Old Irish by the coat sleeve just as he an' Billy is steppin' out of the gym. "That ain't no way to treat nobody, especially him being your son and——"

"He's no son of mine!" he snaps. "I disowned him—years ago!"

"Listen here, Bo!" I cuts loose, intending to tell him just where he could get off, but I stops right there 'cause when he looks up at me I see his faded old eyes is bleary red and the tears is runnin' down the deep drawn lines in his cheeks—lines that wasn't there a couple minutes ago!

So what can I do? Nothin'. I just stands and watches 'em out of sight—him an' Billy. And them proud old shoulders of his'n seems like they sagged a little more at every step.

Naturally, The Kid's training does a tail spin after all this, but he rights himself in a couple or three days and starts bustin' his sparrin' partners around the ring like he has a personal grudge agin 'em. A couple of 'em gets frosty dogs and runs out on us, but I coaxes 'em back into camp and things gets to making such speed the sport writers begins to dope it out we ain't nothin' short of an overdose of dead stools for the champ.

So everything is lookin' ding-dong to cop the belt, but I ain't forgettin' Spud Morrison's tip to look out for counterfeit greenbacks, Muggsy McCan's manager having seen with his own peepers just how big a tingle The Kid really is in the ring. But I don't see nothing wrong and we ends training Thursday noon, the day before the big argument, an even bet to lift the crown.

Then something breaks. I don't know what it is, but by six o'clock that night there's a wave of McCan money flooding the city and the odds runs up to eight to five against Kid Miller and later even higher!

You could have busted me for the count with a fourteen ounce trainin' mitt! I slips on my derby and does a marathon around the betting stalls and it ain't no time until I figgers the racket—it's the *educated* what's talkin' for the champ and believe me it's bellowing. The sure-thing gang is backing McCan to the limit—them shifty eyed bozos that somehow don't never lose!

Preest!

I runs off enough fat to bring me down to the heavyweight limit before midnight trying to figure out who's dopin' our gin and how, but I don't get to first base.

THE next morning it's the same. I gets hold of Spud. He says our goose is cooked as far as winning goes, but he ain't been able to get a line on the frame-up. Naturally, I thinks of eight million things, among 'em the gal with the come-hither eyes and a story about her little sister being in danger; the old kidnapping game and knock-out drops. I burns up a set of taxi tires gettin' back to the hotel.

Glory Pete, the Kid's there! He ain't hep to the discord and I'm just about to give him the line-up when the telephone bell rings in my room adjoining his'n. When I answers it a bozo bellows that he

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wants to talk to Kid Miller's manager and nobody else will do.

"This is him speaking," I says.

"Well, speaking's about all you're good for!" He shoots. "A helluva manager you are! They've been doctoring The Kid's scales every night at the gym for two weeks. I just learned about it and they—" He stops for breath.

"Doctoring the scales!" I pipes. "What d'ya mean, doctoring the scales?"

"What I says. I just got it off'n a fellow—and he knows. The lad's six pounds over weight!"

"Over weight? Get out!" Chirps I, gettin' back some of the old confidence. "Tell that one to the fish down to the aquarium!"

"I'm telling it to you, you lob-headed thumb-knocker!" he screams and I can most hear him biting off the telephone thing you talk into. "They made the scales half a pound light every night and you've been training The Kid up instead of down!" he yells. "It's one o'clock now and they're goin' to call you by phone at four, figgering the lad'll hit a steam bath and take off the weight—an' if he does in that time he won't be more'n able to climb into the ring."

"Preest!" I gulps, something tellin' me this canary is slipping me a straight deal on the dope. "You mean they—are you—who's talking?" I stutters, goofier'n a cricket.

"None of your damned business!" he snaps and hangs up on me.

Six pounds over weight—*six pounds!* Just the same as a million to a well trained welterweight in the pink of condition when it comes to takin' them off in a few hours—and they was goin' to tell us about it at four o'clock!

I brings out my watch—we got a three hour start on 'em. It ain't much, but a helluva sight better'n none.

"What's the racket?" The Kid butts in, seeing me staring at my watch like it was a casket and wetting my handkerchief on my forehead.

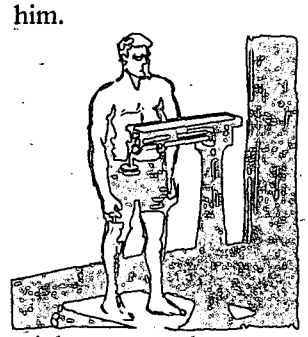
I looks him over careful, but it's hard to tell with his clothes on.

"Turn around," I says. I studies him a bit—and danged if he don't look big—too big! Preest! "Come on!" I yells, grabs him by the arm and races for the elevator—there's a Turkish steam bath room in the hotel basement. We hits the joint like a fire truck.

"Step on them scales, Kid," I says when we'd got him stripped.

FOR a minute I ain't got the nerve to look at the dial and when I does I can't see it for a bit. But finally I gets a focus on it—and the hand is pointin' straight at the figger 153! To get a shot at Muggsy we got to make the welter limit, 147 pounds, ringside, in about nine hours. Preest! An' here I'd been pattin' myself on the back thinkin' the change of climate was keepin' The Kid's weight down!

"Kid," I gulps. "Kid—I—I've—Judas Preest!" I stands starin' but not seeing him.



For one ghastly moment he studies the scale not more'n half believing his eyes. Then he swallers a couple times and seein' me takin' the count, as you might say, reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right, Fat," he says. "You ain't none to blame. I—I'll take the weight off—and still beat hell out of him!"

"'Atta boy, Kid," I says. "I know you will!" But deep down I sees he ain't got one chance in a million—lucky if he's got the strength to even walk after he takes them six pounds off in nine hours.

At nine-thirty we rushes him from the bath house straight to The Garden. He makes the welter limit—an even hundred and forty-seven pounds—but them hours on the steam an' rub table where we'd sweated and massaged off the flesh has sure wrecked him. It was spring steel muscle we took off'n him, every ounce of it.

Lookin' at him now, I most cries like a baby. He's about as peppy as a stoat and his face is a grayish white, and drawn like he's been on a two weeks bat. He sits limp, kinda draped over his stool.

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Muggsy McCan leers at us. Lamping The Kid and knowin' what's wrong, he figgers he can slap him to sleep whenever he gets ready. I figgers it the same way. What The Kid needs is food and rest. There ain't no chance to get much of either for him, but I sets out to cop what I can.

Most every one figgers I'm nuts when I hands him a pint thermos bottle of hot beef tea—not two minutes before the scrap's supposed to start! But I has plans and puts 'em to work. I dopes it out that the broth and a thirty minute rest will make a new man out of him, so I stretches him out on his stool, shoulders and head restin' against one of his seconds—and begins to find fault with things.

They's a bump in the canvas. It takes a couple minutes to smooth it out. Then I busts a lace on The Kid's mitt. That takes five minutes. I busts the other. We gets that fixed and I complains about the lights, the ropes—even finds a loose ring post! This all takes time and the fans is shootin' the raspberry, but I should worry, havin' hooked blamed near the half hour I started out for.

You could most see The Kid fill out, but when I can't hold off the gong another minute, he's fast asleep! It's the effects of the steam bath. I jerks him.

"Take him on the button," I whispers, "right off the bat. Don't feint nor do no preliminary stuff—just step out and soak him. It's your only chance."

He nods. The champ's snarling, gets poised to dash across and flatten The Kid at the gong before he gets tuned up by an exchange of blows.

The time keeper's hand trembles on the bell rope.

"Clang!"

MUGGSY springs, right and left set for business.

The Kid, still sittin' on his stool, blinks his eyes.

"Soak him!" I yells and splashes a sponge full of ice water down his back.

It's just like droppin' the go-devil down a new drilled gas well. The Kid shoots off'n his stool and across the ring like a torpedo. He sees the champ's pan unexpectedly close and just instinctively lets fly at it—a flashing right and left, both barrels aimed straight at the button.

They lands, but Muggsy, though he ain't set for it, shifts enough to roll the steam out of one and half-founders the other. Even at that his knees starts to jell but before The Kid can repeat he falls into a clinch—and the chance is gone.

The referee parts 'em and The Kid keeps boring in with rights and lefts to the pan but Muggsy falls into another clinch and shoots a short cork-screw left to the stomach. It's an over-handed wallop that slides down near the top of The Kid's trunks and brings a flash of pain to his face.

"Keep 'em up!" The referee warns, remembering the foul credited with gettin' Muggsy the title from Billy Slater.

"They *are* up!" Muggsy snarls, surprised, for he was on the off-side of the referee at the time.

Just as he speaks, The Kid steps in, slips over a hard sock to the heart and crosses to the chin. It staggers Muggsy off balance and I gives The Kid the office to finish it while he's got the strength. He's around Muggsy like a cooper round a barrel, shootin' punches from all angles, but they ain't got the old steam. Muggsy does some cagy rope work and slides out from under. Then he shoots a haymaker at The Kid but misses and The Kid shuts both eyes and lets fly. It takes the champ fair on the button. He wilts.

The customers goes nuts.

The referee begins to count.

At *five* I'd have bet twenty percent of the gates he's out for a week. But he's a tough hombre. He gets to his knees at seven and at nine he's on his feet!

"Finish it, Kid—finish it!" I bellows—and he steps in. He measures the champ and gives him a ten second ticket straight to the poppy fields. It's a clean punch right through Muggsy's goofy guard and to the point of the chin.

You could hear the fans catch their breaths. Eyes bulged out like saucers as the glove smacks home. The sportwriters cranes their necks to get every detail of the knockout. Panting like a shepherd dog on an August day, The Kid stands there expecting the champ to fade. I'm so sure

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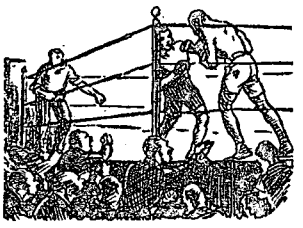
he'll drop, I can see him doing it—only he don't!

The Kid glances at me with the most gawdawful look of helplessness in his eyes I ever seen. But the fans misses that part of it. They're set for the kill. From their point of view it's only a question of one more sock—but I knows different, and so does The Kid. Muggsy has taken the best and about the only punch The Kid has left in his system, an' he's still on his feet.



He's goofy, but not enough to count and he grins when he falls into a clinch an' shakes his head to get his eyes back into focus——

"Who to hell said you was a socker!" he sneers and a moment later cuts loose with a wave of left jabs that carries The Kid to the ropes and most pins him there. But the lad slips out only to fall into a shower of body punches. Solid socks near the belt. He staggers around the center of the ring and the fans, balloon eyed, pops to their feet as Muggsy shoots a one-two punch. The Kid kisses the canvas—splash!

HE'S up at four, but the pep's out of him and he dogs it the next thirty seconds, figgerin' on the minute rest between rounds to perk him up again.

"Ya did great—most had him twice, the skunk!" I whispers as we drapes him on his stool and starts working over him.

He don't pay no attention, just stares with them tired eyes of his'n at two vacant seats in the second row.

"Is—he ain't here—is he?" he says, and slumps back on his stool, bitin' his lip.

"I ain't saw him," I comes back, knowing who he means—he's sent Old Irish and Billy the tickets for them empty seats the night before— "but I expect maybe both of 'em is caught in the jam by the door."

He shakes his head and kinda swallows —at nothing.

At the gong Muggsy comes out like a Kansas twister. He's all in the pink and seeing The Kid wobble to his feet, figgers it's time to label him. Ordinarily, he'd of been right, but though he didn't know it, there was a heart in that rag of a body, the fighting heart of a Slater!

The Kid learned this fight game from his dad who got it from his'n and the general idea was that an attack is the best defence, so he somehow cuts loose with a solid sock to the jaw. Muggsy drops on a surprised pair of haunches. But he's up before the referee counts one, an' plungin' straight into a clinch, maneuvers his back to the referee, works his mitts to the inside and shoots home a short blow to the wind, then another even shorter to the belt. It's a down-ward punch that rips its way below the foul line and deep into The Kid's groin. Camouflagin' it in a flash, Muggsy lands a fair right to the wind and a heavy left to the chin.

Kid Miller slips to the canvas, face white with pain.

"Foul! Foul!" Some ringside fans scream. I starts to climb into the ring to claim the decision, but I stops—The Kid has ordered me to keep my mouth shut in case this very thing happens.

"Seen him do it!" some bird in the front row sputters.

The referee's dizzy tryin' to figger what to do. He hadn't seen the foul, but he knows the champ's reputation. He turns to me. Somehow I manages to shake my head. He starts counting.

The Kid, squirming on the canvas, gets one leg straightened out and begins to get up. He skids his snozzle on the canvas, but tries it again. This time he falls over backward.

"Seven."

He looks like he's out for a month.

"Eight."

He's on both knees, and at nine he's up!

The fans cut loose a bellow.

But he's up for punishment. A right to the belt drops him. Up at six he drops again at the next punch. Up and down—down and up! Preest! It was a slaughter.

"Shall I stop it?" the referee asks.

The Kid focusses bleary eyes on him.

"If you stop it—I—I'll bust ya!" he coughs. The referee looks at me. Before I can decide, The Kid's up and that second Muggsy unloads another pile-driver wallop.

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As far as The Kid's concerned he might just as well have been hit with a sledge hammer. He jells, face down—out!

THE fans comes to their feet like they was spanked with an electric current.

Countin' is just a formality. The referee begins.

"Four—five—six——"

The fans stands in awed silence.

The Kid never moves a muscle. Except for that wheezy mass of breathing you could have heard an ant crawl.

Then a cry most splits my ear drums.

"Get up, Kid—get up!"

Everybody turns. Old Irish Slater, who had slipped into a rear seat with Billy, is running, staggering down the aisle toward the ring!

"Lad, lad, up with ye!" He pleads, pounding the edge of the ring platform with open hands.

But The Kid don't hear.

"Eight."

"Lad—don't ye hear me?" The old man pleads, then turnin' to no one in particular. "He—he's out—plumb out!"

But a sudden flurry of new excitement catches those about the ring. The timekeeper, face apoplectic, gets up from his seat, watch clutched in one twitchin' hand, the bell rope in the other. Beads of perspiration pops out on his forehead.

"Nine."

The referee's arm raises again, slow, mechanical, then starts down for the fatal ten. But a gleam of hope flashes across Old Irish's face. He's seen the timekeeper's eyes bulge; his twitchin' hand steady itself.

The final word forms on the referee's lips, but it's never spoken. It's drowned in a metalic clang. The bell has saved Kid Miller by a wee fraction of a second!

We jumps through the ropes. I gathers up The Kid; carries him to his stool.

The rubbers start working on him.

"Out for a month!" one of 'em says.

Giving The Kid a quick once-over, I agrees and takes a towel from one of the rubbers and starts to throw it into the ring—sign of defeat. But Old Irish, waving his arms frantic, stops me.

"No!" he bellows, "give the lad a chanct!" And with that him an' Billy climbs through the ropes and elbows the rubbers away from The Kid. The old man presses an ear against The Kid's heart. He's satisfied.

"How much time?" he says.

"Forty-four seconds," I says.

He grunts and droppin' to his knees in front of the boy starts slapping his legs an' arms with his open hands. Billy, drops down beside him and starts doin' the same thing.

"Water bucket!" Old Irish snaps and as we hand him a pail he starts slapping The Kid's cheeks, hands dripping with ice water.

"How much now?"

"Twenty seconds."

"Hell!" he sputters and dips his hands into the ice water again. Crack! Crack! They splash sprays of water like electric needles at the sides of The Kid's neck, an' he opens his eyes!

Irish grabs the smelling salts; holds the bottle under his nose. A wave of life sweeps through him.

"D-dad!" he marvels. "Is—is it you?"

The old man's reply chokes in his throat, but he manages to nod.

"It—it ain't over—is it?" The Kid whispers, gettin' his mind focused on the fight again.

"Over? hell, no! You'll beat him yet, lad, spite of everything!"

A PUZZLED look puckers The Kid's forehead.

"Everything?" He says. "You—you know about 'em dopin' the scales on me?" He whispers.

The old man nods. "Found out about it this noon, lad, an'——"

"Dad! You—it wasn't you what phoned tippin' us off?"

Old Irish nods again and a strange, sort of peaceful look flits into The Kid's eyes.

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"What—did ya do that for?" he asked vaguely.

"Shure—I reckon I—I—" A sob threatened to choke the words, but he struggles on. "I reckon I wanted ya to win, lad," he finishes, and The Kid sits bolt upright on his stool, marveling. Then slumps. "But I—I——"

"Shure ya kin!" Irish cuts in. "Listen lad——" He bends over to whisper in The Kid's ear. "When ya get up just take one punch at him—just one. He won't be expectin' of it. Make it a right sock just under his left ear, lad—just under the left ear an' flush on the carotid artery. It's the Slater punch, lad; yer grandfather's punch—an' mine, get me?"

The Kid claims he does an' a gleam of satisfaction ripples the old man's face, then turns to consternation. The Kid has fainted again!

Frantically, they works on him.

"Five seconds," I says. "Now four!"

"Lovin' St. Pat!" Old Irish looks down at the boy. "No chance," he chokes turning to me. "He ain't really hurt none. Just fagged plumb out from exhaustion and takin' off that weight. But he's done for tonight—throw in the towel, mister."

But the words registers somewhere in The Kid's groggy brain.

"No—no!" He wheezes, an' when we looks at him, he's sittin' up straight on his stool, eyes wide open but not focused on nothing! "No!" he spouts again.

Towel in hand, I hesitates.

Clang! It's the gong, and before none of us can stop him, The Kid is up from his stool and weavin' a groggy course toward the center of the ring!

"Preest!" I gasps. "He's out on his feet—unconscious!"

Old Irish grabs me as I starts to jump after The Kid.

"He's on his feet, anyways!" he bellows and pulls me through the ropes and off the platform.

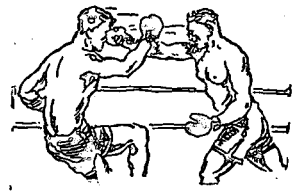
McCan, seein' The Kid goofier'n a hophead, stares, then steps up to finish it.

"If you're bound to have it—take it!" he snarls as The Kid stands wobbling there in mid ring, mitts out in a half-fighting posture.

The Kid blinks, staggers forward.

"Here's yours!" Muggsy grins and levels a right at him. But just then The Kid° lurches to one side. Intentionally? Don't know. But, anyways, Muggsy mitt whizzes past his chin, missin' it by a fraction of an' inch, an' that moment The Kid shoots a punch of his own—a right hook to the upper jaw!

It wasn't much of a wallop, but it's the



only one he has left and no one but Old Irish could have brought it out. Light though it is, his goofy brain had centered on it like in a dream—and the aim is perfect! It catches the champ just below the left ear, on that tenderest of all vulnerable spots, the carotid artery, for the minute paralyzing it—*the Slater punch!*

Muggsy looks at The Kid foolish for a bit, then closes his eyes and hits the canvas—just a lump of flesh!

The Kid, most as surprised as Muggsy, stands staring at him. He vaguely passes the back of one glove over his forehead; tries to wet his dry lips with a dryer tongue and lets the referee move him to a neutral corner.

Then the referee starts counting. It's just a formality.

"Nine," he says, then, "ten—and out!"

Fans, thousands of 'em swarms toward the ring, cheering like mad.

I starts climbing back onto the platform, so does Old Irish.

The referee puts an arm around The Kid, standing there goofier'n Hungarian goolosh.

"Kid Miller!" says the referee, raising his right arm. "New welterweight champion of the world! He's the——"

"Kid Miller, yer grandmother!" Old Irish Slater bellows, red faced and wheezin'. "Folks!" He makes a sweep of his hand toward the new title holder, then puts his arm around him. "Folks," he says, "this here is Young Kid Slater—that's who's the new welter champeen! He's my son, get me? My son, *Young Kid Slater!*"

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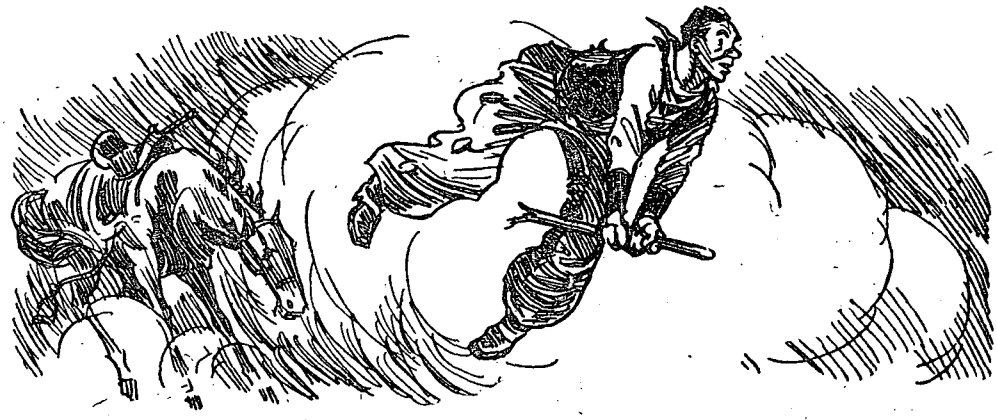

THE BAR ACT

By BUD LA MAR

Author of "Three Wise Men," "Injun Luck," etc.

THE WAY LEN CARTER WON RODEO PRIZES WAS GETTING TO BE A BORE—TO THE OTHER CONTESTANTS. BUT WHEN HE BEGAN TO MIX AUTO PARTS UP WITH TRICK RIDING SOMETHING UNUSUAL HAD TO BE DONE—AND WAS

NOVELTY is a thing that will crop up in the most unexpected places, making an appearance at no given time. Gifted with a good deal of perserverance, a strong microscope and the eye of an eagle, a persistent person would even discover faint signs of the element among Digger Indians.

The go-getter who can surprise the world with something new, anything from an automatic doughnut cutter to Pullman accommodation to the moon, is all set for a reserved seat on top of the scrap heap—assuming that he sleeps with one eye open and a cocked six-shooter under his pillow. Neglecting such vital precautions, he will find himself playing the part of the snipe hunter, holding an empty sack in a hopeful attitude, while some other fellow is smoking four-bit cigars and writing editorials on How To Be Successful.

"You win," said the jack rabbit to the mud turtle. "But wasn't the scenery wonderful!"

"What scenery?" said the turtle, which brings us back to Leonard Carter, the fancy trick rider, and his famous and much discussed Bar Act.

In the days during which the following surprising incidents took place, the Bar Act was an unknown element among rodeo performers; unknown as a sirloin steak to a sea going Eskimo. It was to become famous over night in a very spectacular fashion. As the hound dog said when the bear took after him: "And how!"

Leonard always led the field when it came to inventing fancy and impossible looking trick riding stunts. Once, an imaginative cowboy, after practising the thing a whole winter, astonished rodeo going audiences by standing on his head on the back of a running horse. The next day, Carter came out riding on his left eyebrow, spinning a rope in each hand and waving a flag between his feet. Or some other fool stunt. Whatever it was that he did seemed about as simple and devoid of interest to the spectators as a wind broke horse playing the bagpipes. The judges rated Carter's stunt as a full house against the busted flush of the fellow who stood on his head. Which is a heap of difference considering the high cost of living.

THE first rodeo of any importance to be held each year is presented in Cowtown, Texas. Following a long cold winter, it is the contestant's first chance to

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bulldog the elusive iron men. The punchers swoop down upon the town from every direction, taking advantage of any means of transportation known to man. And a more hungry looking bunch of cowhands has never made an appearance at a public place.

I've heard it said that a cowboy won't walk. I know one who carried his saddle on his back all over northern Colorado.

Yes, I know him intimately and well!

Many a flivver loaded with riding gear and individuals wearing big hats has choked to death on its last drop of gas within a radius of ten miles from the thriving community of Cowtown. However, of late years, the boys have figured out a scheme to beat this transportation game. They spend the winter there. Which makes it reasonably certain that they will not miss the first contest of the year.

The strained circumstances of most of the hands is what makes that show the wild ripsnorter it is noted to be. Folks watching a lean hungry boy riding for day money (with a large steak and trimmings in sight if he can do it better than the other boys) are watching a ride what is a ride! Every cowboy working there goes for it with blood in his eye. Some will be friends again when the stampede is over, but while that blowout is taking place, it's every man for himself and the Lord help the women and children.

All the trick riders in the racket know Carter for what he is, a real hand. At various times, without warning and on the last day of the show, he has dashed out on the race track, wild eyed and grinning, successfully accomplishing some impossible riding feat, the sight of which caused his competitors to bite large salty chunks out of their saddles, with never a doubt in their minds as to who would be presented with the gold edged certified check.

Later, they mastered the same trick. They had to, to live. But never knowing when this enigmatic chap was going to blossom out in some new scandalous stunt, they regarded his every doings with deep suspicion and distrust. They attempted to sneak up on him while he was practising, and practise is one thing that a trick rider has to do, regular and often. But apart from the fact that Leonard Carter did the bulk of his experimenting between the hours of midnight and sun-up, he was gifted with a sixth sense which never failed to warn him of prying eyes hid in the vicinity of his night activities.

On this occasion, the first days of the show brought forth no new development in the trick-riding and the trick riders began to breathe easier. So far they all had had an even break and only one more performance to go. But, having been fooled before, they kept both eyes open. And that night they opened them still wider. In fact, said optics attained unbelievable sizes. Heads were brought together in frantic efforts to comprehend and fight the possibilities of an unexpected bomb tossed into their midst.

ONE of them, more far sighted than the rest, had gone to a printing office to obtain the next day's program. And now they sat open mouthed in a hotel room, called together in a special meeting, to see what could be done about it.

On this program, after Carter's name, there was printed an enumeration of tricks to be performed by him and after the well known shoulder stand, vaults, double vaults and others, stood three mystifying words ending the list: The Bar Act!

"And who the hell," said Bobby Stuart, "ever heard of the Bar Act?"

"If I had never heard it but once," said Slim Jones, "the sounds of it would give me the earache!"

"Maybe it's one of them there circus stunts, where some feller rides a bare-backed horse and turns handsprings over a go-gadget," puts in Buck Farrell brightly.

"Yeah, and more likely it's only the well known gravity defyin' feat of puttin' a live elephant into violent motion by graspin' him delicately by the tail and propelin' through space from the back of a

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runnin' horse. Who knows?" said Bobby Stuart in a dejected manner.

"We gotta find out!" moaned Lou Warner holding his head between his hands and gazing ceilingward in a thoughtful expression. "We gotta find out!"

"Most likely it's some dum fool thing that don't amount to nawthin'," said Buck hopefully.

"Shore! Who cares about a thousand dollars anyway?" mused Slim, a sick looking grin on his face.

"We gotta find out! We gotta find out!" groaned Lou again.

"We'll never do it a-sittin' here," said Bobby in a business like tone of voice. "Let's all go down to the barns where Leonard keeps his horse and watch what takes place. All the practisin' he done here was mornings, at the show grounds. I know that he never left the hotel at night. His work-outs was all performed in plain sight and if he done any Bar Act that I could see, I'm a cock-eyed whippoorwill a-whistlin' for his mate!"

Buck stepped to the window and peered out at the night. "Nice and dark out there," he said. "Maybe he wouldn't see us if we was careful. Let's peel off our big hats and white clothes, them that's got 'em on."

His suggestion was taken up at once. Dark shirts were produced from various trunks and cream colored Stetsons discarded. One by one the vigilance committee filed out of the room into the hall and from there to the street by a back door. The hour was late and the city asleep.

RUBBER tipped boot heels lightly pounded the deserted sidewalks of the slumbering metropolis. Pauses were made to peer around corners and glance behind in efforts to discover any chance trailers. The coast was clear and at the edge of the town the conspirators gathered into the protecting shadows of a barn.

The silence was terrifying and a mere whisper was like the howling of a pack of coyotes. A shadow detached itself from the silent group, slipped easily through a window and disappeared within to return in a few minutes and announce with eloquent gestures and facial expressions that all horses were inside and accounted for.

The ghostly gathering gained sitting postures, ears strained for approaching footfalls. Large chunks of silence floated by. A horse coughed. Nerves tensed, and relaxed. The moon came out from behind a cloud, sneered and slunk back from sight. Trained, hardened muscles became cramped from the immobility and tenseness required by the situation. The grass was slightly damp and after a time, all felt as disgustingly wet and chilled as if at the bottom of a well.

Buck Farrell repressed a sneeze and whispered, "Fine way to be a-trainin' to win a trick ridin' contest! I betcha I'll be so dum stiff and sore in the mornin——"

"Shet up!" warned a voice. "Lissen!" Ears strained anew and every one breathed rapidly in short, expectant gasps.

An automobile was approaching from the town, the exhaust firing noisily, no apparent efforts at secrecy being made. "It's Carter's buggy," said some one. "Everybody duck!" Duck they did. Some disappeared behind a manure pile, others lay stretched on the ground, close to the sides of the barn.

The car chugged ahead. A bright light danced on the front of the building. Brakes squeaked. The engine died. A door slammed shut. A tall slender form wearing a big hat and carrying a long object wrapped in a blanket strode across the lighted path, humming happily. The doors of the barn were shoved open, the rollers grinding on the steel rail.

A voice sounded, talking soothingly in a senseless fashion as a man to a horse to keep from startling the animal. The dull thud of leather slapped on a blanketed form. The dry click of a latigo strap after the knot is made. Carter emerged from the barn into the lights of his car, leading his famous trick riding horse Spots, and carrying the mysterious wrapped object.

He walked to the automobile, switched off the lights, mounted and rode off at a walk.

Crouching shadows followed into the night.

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THE average walk of a horse is somewhat faster than that of a man. Some horses naturally fall into a sort of shuffling motion, between a walk and a trot, called a running walk. And that of all the walks is by far the swiftest. Spots was a running walker and easily fell into that gait.

At first, the would-be investigators sneaked slowly and cautiously behind their quarry. But the realization that they would need to attain greater speed or be considerably late at any demonstration of fancy riding urged them on at a faster clip. Keeping a safe distance between themselves and the object of their interest, they struck a dog trot, stumbling over invisible ruts and stones.

I have offered to prove that a cowboy will walk under certain conditions and now I have a bunch of them running over a rough road in the uncertain hope of seeing another cowboy perform an unknown trick, so they could duplicate it. Strange doings indeed!

Although the night was dark, they were forced to keep at a certain distance in the rear to avoid detection. At times they became alarmed, thinking that Carter was looking back over his shoulder. Especially on straight stretches this fear was more potent. Then they took to the brush, hardly daring to breathe. The faint sounds of hoofs striking hard ground drifted back to them and after a while they continued on their journey, running faster now to catch up.

It is indeed surprising how far a horse can go without stopping to rest and sit by the roadside. Possibly that thought has never occurred to anyone except these boys who considered it vital to follow one. In any case many miles were eaten up in this strange marathon.

High heeled boots, made snug and in some cases actually tight, are not the proper kind of footwear to use on a long distance cross-country run. But in this instance they were worn by the runners, adding a good deal to their discomfort. Bare headed, they looked like Indians trailing a victim, crippled Indians, poor aged, worn out Indians, wobbling at the knees and groaning from the pain and soreness of their feet. But with admirable spirit they raced on, jaws set and breathing heavily, their hair wet with sweat, and shirts open at the neck.

The horse ahead left the road and led the chase through sage brush and short grass, slippery as glass. Prairie dog mounds and badger holes tripped the tired runners. Corns and bunions began to howl for mercy. Was there to be no end to this bitter endurance contest?

THE lights of the town had disappeared behind the last hill. None of the tired pursuers knew in what direction they were traveling. No star twinkled in the sky. No breeze to cool feverish brows. A hot, dark, oppressive night. A high fence loomed ahead. Hopes soared high. Possibly an objective had been reached. Indistinct white, immobile white shapes appeared on the other side of the fence, mounds of fresh earth, a smell of wilted flowers.

"A hell of a place to hold a work out!" panted Slim. "A danged graveyard!"

The mounted figure in the lead came to a stop. His followers dropped to the ground and strained their eyes to catch any movement. A match flared, went out, and a tiny red glow pierced the darkness.

"Carter don't smoke!" exclaimed Buck. "Who—what the——"

The horseman was backtracking and all lay down, faces in the grass. A rod away from the group, a voice shattered the stillness and gloom of the place. A voice that sounded so loud and clear in the silence and the total obscurity that every word seemed to cause a bright flash, like that of a pistol being fired in a tunnel.

"Haw! Haw! You hombres wanted to play ghost and this is a dum good place to do it. Good night, little fellers. I have a date with the queen of Poland to play cards, and I must toddle off. Tata! Glad t' have metcha!"

Then sudden sounds of galloping hoofs

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that swiftly receded, a faint laugh echoing across the prairie, then silence again. The deep ominous silence of the graveyard.

Sudden realization of a sad mistake was followed by other disclosures. The man on the horse was not Carter. The man upon which almost certainly depended the fate of the cursed Bar Act was missing. The horse was not Spots. Somewhere in transit a shift had been made and at this precise moment Leonard Carter was practising the thing, learning to execute it more gracefully, sealing the fate of men who wanted most of all to take off their boots and sleep a dreamless sleep.

RESPLENDENT in colorful raiments, the trick riders rode gracefully to an appointed place, previous to presenting to the spectators, and more especially the judges, the most daring feats of fancy riding known to them. Their horses were groomed to an astonishing brilliancy. Flashes of sunlight striking highly polished silver blazed on gaudy masterpieces of the saddlemaker's art. The band stopped playing and every participant in this contest was introduced to the crowds, riding past at breakneck speed and waving their hats at the appreciative audience. At the other end, a quick drawing was held for turns. Carter drew number one.

Away from close scrutiny of the crowd, smiles left the apparently happy faces of the riders to be replaced by grim, purposeful expressions. Hats were pulled down and safely anchored, for it is the trick rider's pride of accomplishment to attain the most crazy positions possible, to gyrate in a perfect frenzy of motion hanging on to a running horse, and yet to never lose their hats.

Heads were drawn together in a last minute council. Supple bodies leaned out of their saddles to whisper a few words. Carter stood alone, testing straps upon which depended the success of his most difficult tricks.

"Seen anything yet?" said Lou.

"He ain't got the outfit on yet," answered Buck, who was watching Carter like a hungry hawk. "His helper Sam Briggs has got the thing hid by the chutes. At the last minute, they will fix it on the saddle and bingo goes first money!"

"It was Sam as fooled us into followin' him last night," remarked Slim. "The danged, ornery, misfit, pistol-necked, poisonous centipede! Every time he looked at me this afternoon the old t'rantla would snicker. I'd like to run a number nine boot heel down his lyin' neck. The dum, thievin', dirty heeled, horse currier!" Slim literally shook with rage.

"Four miles on the run, and four miles back—on the limp," mused Bobby thoughtfully. "My feet are so sore that every time they touch something solid I get a permanent wave in my back bone and I see a million stars. I have to bite on a nail to keep from yellin' out loud. Daggone the luck anyway!"

"The bird that mentioned that prospectin' expedition last night is no friend of mine!" put in Lou.

"When I was layin' on that grave last night, tryin' to get rested up so as to go to town," added Buck, "I happened to look up and there was a blamed good epitaph on the tombstone: 'Here lies Ephriam Alexander Biddle. His weary feet will never tread the soil he loved so well. He lived a useful life, he will not roast in hell.'"

"Not knowin' much about poetry," said Lou, "I can't say as to that. But now, by golly, that must be a great feelin'. Knowin' just where you're headed for, like a parcel post package and all! And that there piece about not havin' to stomp on the ground no more. Downright cheerful, I calls it!"

THERE he goes! You follow him, Slim," said Buck, and all hands turned to the business at hand. Carter was galloping his horse past the stands. Kicking both stirrups loose, he grasped the saddle horn in both hands, slid to the ground easily,

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bounced on the hard packed race track and without apparent effort he leaped over his running horse, touched ground lightly on the other side and repeated the process. Without pause he did the same thing again and again.

Grinning widely he worked smoothly, in a misleading, careless manner. There was nothing careless about it. Every move was figured out before hand, timed to a split second and rehearsed uncountable times. He reached the outer end, settled in the saddle and extended both arms in a friendly gesture to the audience. Selling his stuff. The stands roared with approval.

A simple trick but good showmanship; just getting warmed up for the real work ahead. Slim followed, performing as well if not better than Leonard. Then Buck. All did their one trick. Then Carter went out again.

Under the hot Texas sun, these boys drove their hard supple bodies to the utmost in attempting to outdo one another in daring and skill. But the main purpose was to beat Leonard Carter. Under the threat of the mysterious Bar Act, they had reached an agreement. They were to do their very best and all prizes won would be split evenly.

Toward the close of the contest, Bobby who was attempting to go underneath his horse, missed his hold and fell to the ground. His body rolled and taxied along in a sickening fashion. Then he lay very still. An ambulance whizzed out from behind the chutes. Two attendants in white ran out carrying a stretcher. In a few seconds the track was clear again and the show went on.

Someone in the grandstand, possibly an Eastern visitor, exclaimed in surprise, "It looked so easy! So smooth! How could anything like that happen?"

There lay the catch. To make anything look easy which is anything but simple.

At last there was a pause and the announcer boomed out, "Now ladies and gentlemen, your attention is called to the next feature. An entirely new feat of daring performed by Mr. Carter. The Bar Act!"

During this short announcement a man had emerged from behind the chutes carrying the mystifying elongated object. As he ran for Carter, he peeled from around it a blanket which he let drop on the ground.

The remaining riders stopped wiping the sweat from their faces to gaze at the approaching instrument. They leaned ahead and stared intently. Some sort of a rail.

LOU, gifted with a better sight than the rest, identified it for what it was and exclaimed, "I hope to bust a cinch if it ain't a daggone Ford axle!"

A Ford axle it was, and with great speed it was being adjusted on Carter's saddle, sticking out and away from it like a handle bar of a bicycle.

"Lissen!" said Buck excitedly. "We can beat him yet. Slim, you run out and get anything you can find that we can hook up on our saddles. Bring a rope with you. Go like hell and come back faster. We'll watch this and go old Carter one better!"

Slim did not stop to argue. Straight for the chutes he rode his horse at the speed of a comet. Nothing there. Out through a gate he flew and disappeared from sight.

Carter was ready. His helper withdrew from the track. He leaped gracefully onto his horse and loped toward the stands. Suddenly he leaned out, grasped the extreme end of the axle and left the saddle. On the end of the galloping trapeze he began whirling around like a whirligig. The effect of a man spinning so fast as to cause a blurred vision, doing his spinning away from a horse running full speed, was startling to say the least. Every one present stood up and gasped, open mouthed, with wonder and admiration.

Soon it was all over and a mighty roar of appreciation filled the air. The Bar Act had been a success and a sure winner, unless—— The tall figure of Slim, belaboring his racing horse with a singular object and carrying another of the same shape, was seen crossing the centerfield at great speed.

Between him and his friends, dressed in the height of cow country elegance, a trick roper was tenderly coiling his expensive ropes prior to laying them away in a silk lined trunk. He was occupying himself

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picking short blades of grass from a sixteen dollar Manila rope, made in old Mexico. The strands of that rope had been twisted together so painfully and exactingly that a steel awl could not be driven between them. It had been balanced so exquisitely at the hondo with fine copper wire that its owner could handle it like a thing alive. It was called a double ocean wave rope. It took several years to break in such a rope so that it was worth its salt. This particular roper would sooner lose an eye than his beloved trick rope.

But Slim was in need of a rope. In the excitement, he had forgotten to procure one. The man who stood in his path, engaged in his peaceful occupation, reminded him of his mission. He had no time to go back and so he did the next best thing. Leaning away from his horse, in the fashion of a bulldogger about to jump on a steer, he grabbed the rope out of the astonished trick roper's hands and made for his waiting friends.

To see the apple of his eye being borne away by a locoed trick rider was not a thing to be taken lightly by the owner. With a bellow meant to denote rage and intention to do murder, he set out after the thief at a fast run, screaming to high heavens his aim of obtaining quick and bloody revenge.

SLIM drew up on the track, threw down the objects he had been carrying, including the rope and catching sight of the enraged trick roper hot on his trail, he left once more in a fresh and unobstructed direction.

Like Carter's axle, the objects Slim carried were, as nearly as could be told at a glance, of the same length. However, they were of different material. One was a windmill handle, the other a broom stick. Nothing better available and time being precious, they would have to do. Buck drew from his pocket a sharp knife and after two well applied swipes, the sixteen dollar manila became two. Which made it an established fact that the difficult stunt called the double ocean wave would never again be performed with this particular rope.

At the sight of this sacrilege, the trick roped who had drawn near stopped in his tricks, paled, and fainted dead away!

In less time than it takes to tell, the implements were installed on the saddles. Buck, his windmill handle securely lashed to the pommel, struck out first to try his luck. It soon became apparent that a strong horse was required for such an act. Given proper warning and some practice, Buck's horse would have been equal to it. As it was, he stumbled, got off his course and ended up by falling into a lumbering awkward trot. Buck effected a couple of wild spins, lost his hold and landed on his ear in the dust. He rose immediately, spit out a mouthful of dirt and limped off the track cursing his luck.

Lou was next and he galloped down the track hoping for the best and ready and willing to perform the Bar Act as it should be executed. His horse took the shock better than Buck's and had it not been for one single mishap, the Bar Act would have been defeated on its own home grounds. But the broom stick broke. Broke when Lou was spinning his best—and that was going some! It happened that the accident took place when Lou was headed upward. Had it been the other way, he would have flattened himself out like a pancake. He sailed gracefully through the air with a death grip on the remaining piece of the broom handle. The landing was hard and it has been said that when Lou hit the ground, the jar was felt for miles around, going so far as to be recorded on a delicate instrument built for the special purpose of registering earthquakes. Hard as it was, though, it was not hard enough to disable him and with the grin of a man who has tried and failed through no fault of his, Lou withdrew from the vicinity of his downfall.

The announcer bawled above the ensuing tumult that the next event on the program would be the bulldogging of wild long horned Texas steers.

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THAT night, in a hotel room, four cowboys sat around a bed, engaged in the pleasing pastime of dividing a large roll of money. There was Bobby Stuart —one arm in a sling but happy, and Slim Jones, displaying a beautiful purplish eye and telling of some trick roper who in some mysterious fashion had collected two identical optics. Buck Farrell was also present, only slightly damaged, with scratches of no importance. The last was Lou Warner, proudly boasting of almost accomplishing the difficult Bar Act. The gathering was a happy one, regardless of the battle scars.

"Who'da thunk it?" asked Lou. "If we'd only knowed it we wouldn't had to break our dum fool necks trying to do no Bar Act."

"Maybe not," said Buck. "But if it hadn't been for the fear of it, we wouldn't tried so hard on the other stuff and Carter would of won first anyway. He's salty!"

"Well, anyway, we won it," added Slim, stuffing bills into his pockets. "And now, hombres, me for a bed!" Which suggestion, being well made under the circumstances, was followed by all present.

The unexpected had happened when all hopes were dead. Lou Warner had been given first by the judges. Not because of his try at the Bar Act, however.

Said judges, after a hasty conference, had decided that the Bar Act was not a feat to be included at a cowboy contest. It was thrilling and spectacular enough, but the lugging of a Ford axle on a saddle was not a cowboy-like thing to do.

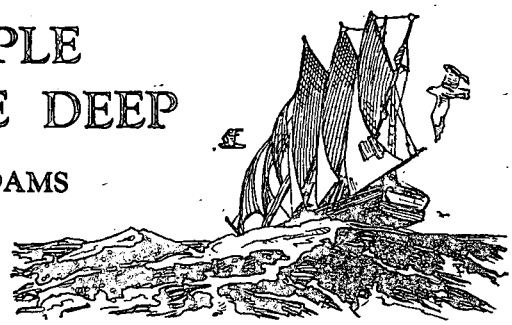
Carter, placing all his confidence on his original invention, had eased up on his other tricks and lost out all together.

The Bar Act has become a sort of legend with the boys who drift over the country making rodeos. But, in the immediate vicinity of Leonard Carter, three words are always omitted in polite conversation.

You've guessed them!

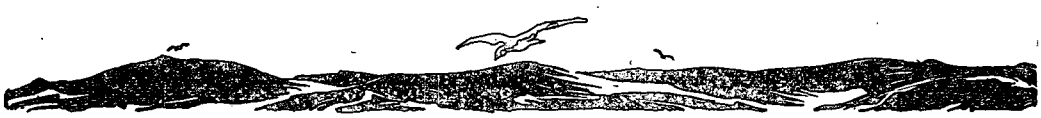
OLD TEMPLE OF THE DEEP

By BILL ADAMS



I DON'T want no one sayin' over me,
"Peace to his ashes."
I hopes my mates will bury me at sea
Where long white rollers splashes.
I wants no daisies growin' on my grave,
Nor withered roses droopin' in a jar.
I wants the long slow sing-song of the wave,
The murmurous old sea, the gleamin' star,
Above me. When time of purgatory is over
An' I have lain long sleepin' in the deep
I wants to rise, on wide white wings to hover
An' down the glory of the gale to sweep.
I wants to be a sea bird, wingin' free
Wild summits of old ocean's majesty.

Some say as sailors' spirits does live on
In forms o' sea birds when their days is done;
An' if it's so, then I says God is kind
An' understands the longings of our minds.
The saints an'angels an' the cherubims
Can have their golden streets an' harps an' hymns.
If He leaves us old ocean an' its ways,
We from its vales will ever give Him praise.



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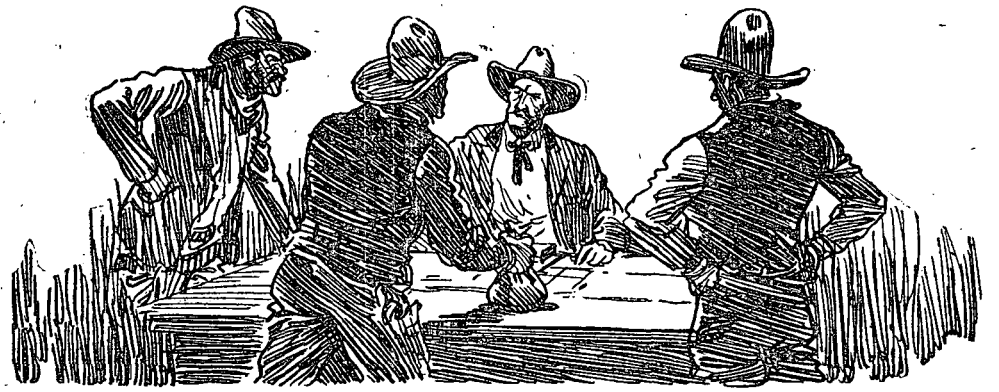

THE SHORTHORN KID

By HUGH PENDEXTER

Author of "Silent Crosby," "The Corral Gang," etc.

FOLKS NURSE A GRUDGE AS LONG AS TIME IN TEXAS, AND THE SHORTHORN KID HORNED IN ON THE GRUDGE OF TOM SLATER OF THE GREAT SLATER RANCH AGAINST OLD SINFUL PLUNKETT OF NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR. BUT THE KID WAS OUT TO EARN THE PRIVILEGE OF RIDING WITH THE TRAIL HERD, AND TO DO IT, MEANT TO SETTLE EVERY PROBLEM FROM BROKEN TRUSTS TO RUSTLED HERDS

Chapter I

HOW THE KID WAS NAMED

TALL TIM and Red Dick, of old Tom Slater's outfit, were in an amiable mood when young Hiram Polk sought them out in Sumner County, Kansas, and requested them to aid him in getting work as a cowboy. The two Texas waddies had tarried behind their mates to polish off a gorgeous drunk and were low in funds and in spirits. To prove he was in earnest young Polk bought a Comanche pony of Tall Tim for fifteen dollars, and a second-hand Texas saddle from Red Dick for three dollars.

"Know anything 'bout herding cows?" Tall Tim curtly asked.

"I know all about it," Polk complacently lied.

"You look to me like a measly shorthorn," growled Red Dick. Polk smiled serenely. Later he would learn this phrase was southwest Texas for "greenhorn." Then Dick querulously asked his companion, "What's the matter with the way he sets in that old saddle of mine?"

Tall Tim stroked his long chin and studied the young man thoughtfully and gravely decided, "He's facin' the wrong way."

"No, he ain't facin' no wrong way," corrected Dick. "Just look at him careful. There! There's his nose. He's looking straight ahead."

"Derned if he ain't. But he looks like he was facin' wrong. Shorthorn, can you use a gun?" And in that moment he had been baptized with the name he would carry over many trails.

"Some."

"Some ain't enough. You must *sabe* a lot about a gun, or be just low-down igerant. Here! Try at that tree with my hope-buster."

He handed over a forty-five, and there followed four shots fired in rapid succession. The bullets smacked so closely together as to cause Red Dick to wink his blue eyes rapidly and grab for the gun, and say, "Use your own lead after this. Where'd you git the trick?"

"Just a notion of mine up in Lawrence. Old-timers were always telling about how Quantrell sacked the town. I took up shooting to make believe I was killing border ruffians."

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"Look here, Kid. Red'n me are hustlin' to San 'Tone to catch up with our outfit afore it leaves for the home-ranch between the heads of the Nueces'n the Frio. We'll burn leather through the Injun Nation 'n sleep in nothin' but a Tucson bed."

Not knowing that the latter couch simply meant sleeping face down on the ground with the one blanket over the head the Shorthorn Kid smiled genially and with some gusto said, "Tucson bed for me any time above any other kind. But how can you sleep in one till you happen to be in Tucson?"

The two exchanged long glances. Tim simply said, "We must take him along. He's too precious to waste on Kansas."

Red Dick nodded. He warned the Kid, "Don't let on south of the Red that you're northern born. War's long over, but folks nurse a grudge a long time in Texas. Tim, just where was he raised?"

Tim scratched his head, and, after brooding for a minute, decided, "Backwoods of Arkansas. Never been nowhere, nor l'arned nothin'."

"Can you l'arn that brand, Kid?" asked Red Dick.

"Sure. I come from Arkansaw. From Hootsville on Binny's Run. Pap was killed right after the war when I was a baby. We all was sort of mis'rable along o' fever 'n'ager."

"Dad burn my boots if he don't come from Arkansas!" exclaimed Tall Tim.

Red Dick frowned and accused, "He's sly. He's older'n he pretends. He's got an ugly devil in his heart. But he was old Quantrell's right-hand bower if the truth was known."

"We'll take turns night standin' watch. More'n one innercent traveler has woke up in the Nation with his throat cut'n his outfit gone," growled Tim.

SO IT came about that the three rode through the Nation and became better acquainted; made the long ride to Sam Antonio, where the Kid hoped to meet and favorably impress old Tom Slater. These days of companionship were filled with much grave ridicule of the young recruit, and a sneaking liking for him and his optimism and egotism. But once they entered the town the Kid was left to shift by himself. His companions, rejoicing to find the rest of the homeward bound outfit lingering in San Antonio, forthwith plunged into carousing.

The Kid, impatient to be forwarding his destiny, secured a room over a gunstore and marked time. Old Slater was expected any day. If the Kid had not been told that he would have set forth alone on a five days' ride to the Slater home-ranch. With nothing to do but wait he visited Jack Harris's Variety Theater, and looked in on the Green Front and did not like it. The town was wide open day and night, with the roof for the limit. The Kid fought against homesickness, for he was as gregarious as a boiled dinner; and he missed the companionship of his two traveling companions and their grave badinage. He worried in secret because he was in a strange land, with few funds and no assurance of work. He never revealed this weakness in talking with cattlemen. Tim and Dick, when he met them, laconically introduced him to men of other outfits and he secretly yearned for the time when he could feel at home under his big hat and could wear the short Mexican "brush" jacket and rawhide chaps without being self-conscious. Out of it all grew a strong liking for cowboys as a class, though his natural bent for asserting himself was held in check, and this chafed him. Then he met Pecos, of the Slater outfit, and began to doubt if he still desired employment where he would be thrown into the man's company.

PECOS, despite his nickname, was a rangy American of middle age. He was a peculiarly unlovable character, although a prime cowhand. He boasted much of his border ruffian exploits and told gruesome stories in which he played a bloody rôle. None of the Slater men courted his company, but all were courteous in their bearing toward him. Tall Tim, speaking for once seriously to the Kid, warned, "Treat that there hombre mighty perlite, Kid. Another back on the ranch, called Harker, much of the same

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breed. Perlite to the two of them if you git as far as the home-ranch."

On their second meeting Pecos began a game that disturbed the Kid much. In the presence of a hilarious group of cowpunchers he simulated great anger and alarm and non-plussed the Kid by whipping out a forty-five with amazing dexterity and presented the muzzle of the cocked weapon close to the astounded youth's face, harshly demanding:

"Be you a sheriff from Missoury, Stranger? Be you lookin' for me?"

Stunned by the unexpected maneuver and in deadly fear less the big gun be fired, the Kid gaped in amazement. The onlookers, despite their dislike for Pecos, grinned broadly.

"I'm no sheriff," the Kid managed to say.

"You be! An' I reckon you're a damn blue-bellied Yankee!" roared Pecos. "Where you come from if you ain't a sheriff?"

The Kid, cross-eyed from glaring into the muzzle of the big gun, mumbled, "Arkansas."

To his amazment Pecos suddenly was overcome by grief. Lowering his murderous weapon he whimpered, "I done wrong. I must pay for it. Here, Stranger, take my gun." He extended the weapon butt first, and then, with marvelous quickness, he twirled it about and presented the muzzle within an inch of the Kid's face. After that he delighted in repeating the dangerous game whenever they met.

The Kid, believing he was doomed to a life of misery until the gun should be accidentally discharged and blow his head off, stayed much in his room and kept on the alert when on the street. Then came the hour when he found the desperado's sport to be intolerable. It was in front of a gambling-place. Pecos stepped from a group of men and held him up and profanely accused him of being a sheriff.

The Kid stood motionless and speechless until the dangerous experience terminated and the big gun was back in its holster. Then he whipped out a pocket revolver, fully cocked, and thrust the muzzle close to Pecos's right eye.

"Damn you!" he told him. "The next time you play that game you finish it and shoot. If you don't I'll shoot."

Pecos's dark eyes glittered savagely. Tall Tim called out, "He ain't goin' to do no shootin', Kid. Put up your gun."

Pecos twisted his lips into a grin and drawled, "If you ever do shoot me with that popper, an' I ever hear about it, I'll kick your pants from here to the head of the Nueces."

"I can spoil your eye," said the Kid, edging the muzzle closer.

Pecos no longer simulated amusement. He fancied the Kid's hand was trembling. He felt the sweat prickling his forehead. A terrible lust to shoot the youngster to rags swept through him. He did not dare to move a muscle. Tall Tim lounged forward, followed by Red Dick.

"Yeah, Pecos," he said. "He's called the turn. Game's run out. If your thumb happened to slip we'd have a dead shorthorn on our hands to bury, an' a hangin' job. You ain't up north, a-ridin' with Quantrell any longer."

"It was all foolin," sullenly said Pecos. "My thumb never slips less I mean it to. You hombres laughed at it—Shorthorn, you can put up that popgun. You might manage to part my hair with it, but that's 'bout all. From now on I sha'n't know you're on earth."

But those who knew Pecos, and who saw the light in his dark eyes, knew he would always remember the Kid was on earth and would itch to put him under it.

THE incident was closed. The Kid went direct to the gun-store and out of his rapidly diminishing capital bought two forty-fives, a broad belt and holster. With the aid of the dealer he made a crude shoulder-sling so he could carry one gun under his left arm, concealed by his coat. Despite his inclination to carry himself

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pertly he was commencing to worry. He had aroused the ire of a man-killer. He had only a bit over fifty dollars of money left. He had banked on Slater's coming to town, and with youthful optimism he had pictured himself as good as hired. Now he was realizing how slim a foundation he had for his wide hopes.

Wearing his guns and grimly determined to maintain his self-respect he tested himself by seeking the presence of Pecos. Heretofore he had avoided meeting the man. He visited various resorts but did not sight Pecos until he entered a gambling hall. Pecos and several of the Slater outfit were trying their luck at a monte game. The Kid joined them and waited for Pecos to badger him. Pecos gave no sign of sensing his presence. Inwardly elated to think he was free to come and go without being tormented by the bully the Kid remained some time, venturing several small amounts on the game, which he lost with a fine show of disdain. But when he quit the place with five ten dollar gold-pieces constituting his sole capital he paused to remember there were no charitable organizations in San Antonio.

He returned to his room to think, to fight against the temptation of traveling back through the Nation. In a corner of the room was a bag of buckshot. He found himself wishing the bag was filled with gold pieces. A nebulous idea formed in his worried brain. Suddenly he picked up the bag and opened the puckering-string and dropped in his gold pieces. The illusion was almost perfect. One, glancing into the bag, would assume it was filled with gold.

Squaring his shoulders and thrusting out his lean jaw he told his distorted image in the wavy mirror, "I rode with the James boys. I'm a bad feller. Robbed banks and trains."

That evening he swaggered into the biggest of the gambling-halls, carrying the bag under his coat. He watched the monte game while the banker drew a deuce and a queen from the bottom of the forty-card deck and placed them face up on the table for the bottom layout. Mentally he told himself, "I'm a deuce trying to act like an ace."

The banker was monotonously inviting, "Come down, gentlemen. Come down with your bets. Make your play.

"Fifty dollars on the deuce of clubs," shrilly announced the Kid, almost before he realized he was to say it. And he plumped down the heavy bag on the table.

"That bag filled with cash?" demanded the banker.

For a reply the Kid opened the bag and fished out the gold pieces and then put them back in the bag.

Two cards were drawn from the top of the deck for the top-layout. After all bets had been placed the pack was turned up face up. The gate-card was of the same suit as the deuce, and the bottom-layout won. Pecos on the same turn lost twenty-five dollars on the top-layout. The Kid pocketed the fifty and left the bag on the table. A club and a spade were in the next bottom-layout, and he bet a hundred. He gritted his teeth as the pack was slowly turned—either to leave him penniless and dependent on one bluff bet on the strength of the bag, or twice a winner. A club was in the gate again. Conquering a wild desire to shout in exultation he pocketed his winnings, and, with the bag still as security, wagered a hundred and fifty on the bottom-layout. He won. By this time several, including Pecos, were eager to follow his play. Pecos hurriedly bet on the next bottom-layout, but the Kid shifted to the top and raked in two hundred dollars.

THE betting was greatly stimulated by these successful plays. The banker smiled benignly. The law of averages would always send back a fat profit to the house. The Kid waited until a new deck was opened and shuffled and then resumed his play. At the end of an hour he picked up the bag containing the buckshot and his original capital, and, with more than a thousand dollars in his pockets, quit the place.

As if good fortune had waited to come double Tall Tim overtook him and said, "If you still hanker to throw in with our

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outfit there's the old man just pulled in to round us up. Don't try to run any bluff on him. Tell him you're a shorthorn."

He ran to meet the little man whose appearance gave no intimation of his being one of the cattle barons of the Southwest. He was an undersized wisp of a man and oddly garbed. Despite the heat he wore a muffler around his lean throat. From one cowhide boot protruded the handle of a bowie-knife. His belt was filled with Henry rifle cartridges, but he carried no rifle, nor wore any gun in sight. He listened to Tall Tim, then waved him aside and motioned for the Kid to approach.

"What you wearing that big gun for?" he barked.

"I like guns."

"Know how to shoot it?"

"I'm a bully shot."

"Know anything about cattle?" Tim, in the background, violently shook his head. The Kid would have preferred some knowledge of cattle. He heeded his friend's warning and frankly answered, "No, sir."

"Then you have a chance with me. I'll learn you right. Ten a month'n found. We start for the Nueces country in the mornin'. Any hell-rakes that stay over in town can stay forever so far as I'm consarned." And he wheeled to dart a fierce glance at Tall Tim. Then he turned and entered a store.

"Short and sweet. I hardly spoke a word," said the Kid.

"Expected him to kiss you, or bake you a batter cake? Lucky you didn't try any fresh game with him. He knows a shorthorn as far as he can see one. But he'll give you two dollers a month more than he pays his Mexicans, and they know the cow-game backwards. Americans learned it of them."

"I'm mighty glad to get the chance to work for him. He seems rather uppity."

"He's got a heap of trouble on his mind. He's combing this burg for Sinful Plunkett, who he run out of the country, an' who's said to have come back."

"He must have a lot of influence to make folks leave such a big state as Texas."

"A forty-five hunk of lead will drop a critter just as hard when it's fired by a peanut size feller as if a giant pulled the trigger," dryly reminded Tim. "Then again, the old man has a way with him. Dad burn if he ain't! It's all sort of sad'n curious at that, Kid. Sinful Plunkett'n him was just like brothers for years. Old man made the money'n Sinful lived on him. Work always seemed to poison Sinful, but in some ways he's smarter'n a snake. It hurt the old man a heap when he found Sinful was runnin' his cattle across into Mexico. Now he's huntin' to find Sinful afore Sinful sees him. Say, Kid, did you know I like you a heap?"

"You've been a mighty good friend, Tim," fervently said the Kid.

"I know you feel that way. Now what I'd like to prepond is that you let me take one of them onery gold pieces to play with."

"Take five gold pieces, Tim. But don't wear your voice out in telling about it."

"By the great stampede! Santy Claus is right in San 'Tone!" And Tim's eyes glistened as the five ten-dollar gold pieces were slipped into his brown hand. "Shorthorn, you're a good kid. I'm goin' to love you all my life. But where'd you git that big poke of gold? Been out ridin' with the James boys? I'll swear you never fetched it down through the Nation from Kansas."

THE Kid opened the bag and removed the gold pieces, and then invited Tim to help himself. The cowboy thrust in an eager hand, but gaped in amazement on beholding the buckshot. The Kid modestly explained, "I had to run a bluff so I could work on credit if I lost the first bet."

Tim pushed back his big hat and rubbed his red forehead and said, "If that bluff had been called you'd been a likely lead-mine afore now. But, dad burn it, you won out! John Wesley Hardin couldn't a-worked it better, but don't try it ag'in. Now just what do you prepond doin' with your noble fortune? Someone will try to git it afore

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mornin'. You'll live longer'n be happier if you blow it all in afore sunrise. Then you can start with a clean slate."

"I think I'll try to hang on to it for a bit."

"Then you come'n bunk with me'n Dick," earnestly advised Tim.

The Kid grinned. He knew the two, now that Tim was reinforced with fifty dollars, would be abroad for the night. "I must take care of it myself, just to prove I can do it," he replied.

They separated, Tim to find his friend and set about investing his gold, the Kid to protect his winnings. The latter realized that his success was a matter of public knowledge by this time. He knew that men were envying him, and that some of them were a law unto their desires. As his hectic elation over his luck had time to cool he discovered he was vastly worried. His intention to guard his wealth began to crumble. Greater men than he depended upon strongboxes and banks. As he hurried to his lodgings he saw his employer entering the gun-store. He hastened to overtake him just inside the door and explain his dilemma.

"Ain't you got guts enough to take care of your own money?" harshly asked Slater.

"Now that you speak of it, Mr. Slater, I reckon I have."

"I ain't time to fuss with such small matters. I'm tryin' to find a certain man. How much money was you honin' for me to set up an' watch?"

"Not much. A little over a thousand dollars."

SLATER pursed his lips and was silent for a few moments. Then he said, "Reckon you're right, so long as folks know you have it. You're young an' a shorthorn. Cusses in this town would joyfully cut your throat for four-bits. I'll ride herd on it. Fork it over."

"No. I was wrong to pass the responsibility to you, sir. I'll herd it myself."

"You talk like a book reads. Where you from? Tim says you're from Arkansas, but he's such a tarnal liar I always believe what he don't say."

Only an employer could take the liberty of delving into a man's hailing-place. It was not good form in Texas. But Slater had a purpose aside from curiosity; for, being informed, he asked. "Ever run across the trail of a man up there with Santy Claus whiskers? He'd likely call himself by his real name, Sinful Plunkett."

"No man of that name, but there's lots of white whiskers up north."

"That don't help much. This one is a smooth, old cuss. He can talk the wool over the eyes of a mad skunk. I'd give a hundred prime steers to see Plunkett afore he sees me. He run off my cattle."

"He probably changed his name."

"He prob'ly didn't. He's proud of it. Bad hellion. I'm keen to git my hooks on him."

"What you going to do with him?"

"None of your business. Think you're a sheriff'n can go 'round askin' fool questions? What would I naturally do to him after I run him out of the brush country because he cold-decked me by runnin' off with my cattle? Sun his moccasins up a tree. I oughter hung him. Had the nerve to send word he's comin' back to explain. He's been seen, I'm told, right here in San 'Tone. I've vowed to stretch him if I catch him. What you lingerin' round here for? Think I come up here to have a talk with you?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have a room here. But I'll go away."

Before Slater could reply the storekeeper bustled in from a back room with two boxes of Henry rifle cartridges, and said, "Hunted high'n low for 'em. Knew I had some kickin' 'round somewhere, I says to myself——"

"Tell the rest of it to the younker. I'm an old man'n have to be sparin' of my time." And Slater left the store to renew his search for the man he would give a hundred prime steers to find.

"Touchy's hell, ain't he?" said the storekeeper. "Queer fire-eatin' old coot."

THE Kid did not reply as he was now watching Pecos, who was standing across the street and watching the store. "On my trail already," the Kid told himself; and the gold in his clothes grew very heavy. He ascended to his room and sat on the bed and worried. Pecos had lost

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heavily. Pecos did not like him. Pecos was after him. Thus ran his thoughts. He decided to forego his supper as he believed he never would return did he venture forth for food. He hid the money under the bed and threw himself down with a gun close at hand. The room was hot, and scarcely a breath of air came through the open window. Outside noises, occasionally punctuated by staccato pistol shots, were so monotonous as to lull him to sleep. He awoke with a start and shifted his cramped position. Silhouetted against the star-flaming sky was the new moon. It was not very dark outside, although he knew it must be near midnight. The town was wide open, day and night.

He slept again, and once more awoke; this time with a jerk. A sense of fear, rather than the night voices, had aroused him. He slipped from the bed and his knee hit the bag of buckshot. He picked it up and would have tossed it aside had not a slight noise under the open window frozen him in a kneeling attitude. One arm was raised to dispose of the bag. It became rigid as he listened and suddenly decided the bag made an excellent weapon if thrown accurately. He had no wish to kill a man. There would be an inquiry. His departure with the Slater outfit would be prevented. He would be pointed out as being the young man who had so much gold. He was bound to be followed did he ride along to the Slater ranch. If Pecos was below the window his friend, Harker, would resent his death. From Tim he had learned that Harker was wanted for murder somewhere.

So he remained crouching on the floor, his right hand gripping the heavy bag and drawn back for a cast. There came a slight scraping sound, which made his nerves tingle. He heard heavy breathing, and realized that his visitor had found some means of climbing to the window. With a grunt the intruder drew himself up and flung one arm over the window-sill.

The Kid's jaw sagged in surprise as he beheld, not the lean, hard face of Pecos, but a wealth of silvery white hair and whiskers. It was no time to respect old age. He hurled the bag, which smashed the robber between the eyes and caused him to disappear like magic. He jumped to the window, gun in hand, and leaned out. A shadowy figure was vanishing around a corner. He did not sleep until near sunrise, and was aroused by the gun-dealer pounding on the door and calling. "You're outfit'll be pullin' out mighty soon. Have coffee'n bacon with me. All ready'n on the table."

"Thank you. I'm coming."

With his few possessions in a sack he descended and enjoyed the dealer's hospitality; and then hurried forth to find his friends. He saw Slater emerging from an eating-house. The old man was picking his teeth with the point of his big bowie-knife. The Kid ran to greet him, and briefly told of the midnight visitation. "The whitest hair and whiskers I ever saw, and——"

"Gadfrymighty! Sinful Plunkett! That old he-hellion has took up breakin' into houses! An' I can't stop to hunt him up. If it was any other time of year I'd camp here till I bagged him."

Chapter II

THE BRUSH COUNTRY

THE Kid took to his new work with avidity. From breakfast of pork, cornbread and greenberry coffee to learning to ride the four horses set apart for his personal use, and bringing in the "decoy" herd from a brush enclosed pasture, he liked it all. When not engaged in routine tasks he learned how to work green hides into saddle-rigging, quirts, reins and ropes. All that was new challenged his ardor. In the working of hides into saddle-gear he found he must depend upon the Mexicans for instruction. They were kind and patient, and he developed a strong liking for Manuel, a veteran. He first asked Tall

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Tim to teach him, but Tim had drawled, "The best way for you to l'arn things is to try all the wrong ways till you find the right way. Then you'll always remember it."

One morning Langty the foreman told him to shoot a beef, and warned, "See you pick out a fat one."

As meat would not keep, it was necessary to kill a beef almost every day. Riding out to the decoy herd he selected a fat heifer and was preparing to pull the trigger of his Henry rifle when Langty rode against him, nearly knocking him from the saddle, and yelling, "Be you blind? Can't you see that brand?"

Somewhat ruffled the Kid answered, "Yes, I can see that brand. It's our brand."

"Then what do you mean by wanting to shoot our cattle? Pick out some other brand. They taste better."

As this illuminating light was penetrating the Kid's mind Slater came ambling up on a lazy pony. Langty added, "Lower your gun. I'll do it. I see a better one."

He drew his Spencer carbine from the saddle-scabbard and fired at a beef, but failed to kill. He fired two more shots without giving a mortal wound. The herd became frightened by the mad plunging of the wounded animal and began milling. The wounded steer broke from the herd and charged blindly toward Langty. A Mexican quickly roped it and spurred his horse away to throw the animal. The rope snapped, and the thoroughly infuriated steer swerved and raced headlong at Slater's slow mount. The Kid threw up his rifle and killed the creature with a shot between the eyes. Slater, who had been in great peril, calmly remarked, "You oughter be a slick one in fightin' the Comanches." Langty did not compliment him.

ONE day the Kid asked Harker, "How's the boss's hunt for Plunkett getting along?"

"Ain't heard a word for a coon's age. It would be mighty neighborly of you to go up and ask."

"I believe I will." He was unconscious of the grinning faces behind him as he made for the ranch-house. Slater was seated before the open door, busily entering figures in a small account book. He jerked up his head and harshly demanded, "Why ain't you about your work? Or have you come for your money?"

Much abashed the Kid replied, "I haven't any wages to speak of coming to me yet. I wanted to know how the hunt for Mr. Plunkett is getting along."

Old Slater lowered at the men, now busily engaged with various tasks, and said, "Prob'ly some of the boys give you the notion of bein' neighborly."

"I asked Harker about it, and he said I'd better ask up here as he hadn't heard anything lately."

Slater hopped to his feet and said, "You're the primest shorthorn I ever see. Why the good Lawd has let you live'n grow up is beyond me."

The Kid began to fear all was not well. Mrs. Slater, portly of build, suddenly filled the doorway and commanded, "Tommy Slater, don't you go to actin' up brash with that child. You hear me?"

Slater swallowed convulsively and sighed, "He can live, Linnie. But I wish you wouldn't always horn-in when I have the notion to see fresh blood."

"Slater, don't you dare bully me!"

"Judas Priest!"

"And don't you take up swearin' in your old age."

With a gesture of helplessness Slater lowered on the Kid in silence. The latter uneasily said, "I reckon I'll be going to my work, Ma'am."

"Shucks! You come in and have some new cookies. You look mighty young an' pindlin' to be working for a slave-driver like Tom Slater."

"Mother, you win. Rake in the chips," gloomily surrendered Slater.

The Kid hesitated, and glanced at his employer. The look he encountered inspired him to say, "Thanks, Ma'am but cookies always poison me."

"You poor, scared little liar! Hop in here. When Tom Slater talks about cattle, you sit up on your hind legs 'n hark. When

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I talk about this house'n new cookies, you hark to me. Come in!"

WARILY eyeing Slater the Kid crossed the threshold. Mrs. Slater pointed to a deep pan of cookies and commanded, "Wade in. I shot two Lippan Apaches from that winder behind you. Old man was away'n they fetched me a battle. Eat." She watched him devour half a dozen cookies, and when he desisted she said, "We have to hire some mighty ornery critters out here. So waddies don't come here till sent for. But you're a child. Who put it into your poor head to ask Slater about Plunkett? There, there, don't bother to lie. I won't ask any questions. Tom Slater did everything for Old Sinful, and it sure cut deep when we found out what he had been doin' to us. Him'n Slater had been together for years'n years. I still have a sneakin' likin' for the old cuss. If he'd needed cattle, or money, all he had to do was to say so. Now fill your pockets'n git back to work." Raising her voice she added, "Tom Slater's a devil when he gits started. No one dares even to yip."

Slater was not in sight when the Kid quit the house. Harker, the refugee, twisted his lips in a grin, as the Kid approached the men, and said, "We reckoned the old man sent you inside to be killed."

The Kid brought out a handful of cookies and began eating them, and between mouthfuls explained, "He wants me to bunk at the house and give all my time to running down Sinful Plunkett. Says I'm the only one in the outfit who has brains above the level of a steer. But I told him I couldn't leave you boys." Harker, dubious yet impressed, walked away in silence.

WHILE no one day seemed to bring much improvement to the Kid's efforts to become a full-fledged waddie the total effect was very promising. He had learned all the tricks of his several mounts, and had discovered that each had a distinct personality. Only one gave him any serious trouble, but Manuel soon cured him, and he became the Kid's favorite mount. Many of the horses acted like demons and could be ridden only by the veterans. The one thing the Kid did not have to learn was the knack of shooting big revolvers rapidly and accurately. He was surprised to discover that he need not step aside for any member of the outfit in this particular.

He was generally well liked, and he believed Tim and Dick were genuine friends, although at times they had an odd way of indicating as much. He knew that Langty did not like him, although the foreman's manner was decent enough. The Mexicans continued eager to teach him all the intricacies of the dangerous, fascinating game. It was Manuel, prince of vaqueros, who acted as his mentor during the week the outfit drove the decoy herd into the brush to aid in the capture of wild cattle. It was Manuel who, perhaps, saved him from being bitten by a rattler and taught him to be cautious in picking up dead wood for a campfire. His hand was all but upon the snake when Manuel's high-heeled boot stamped out the venomous life. At the outset of his strenuous schooling the Kid had learned that all the men went fully armed day and night. Revolver and knife were an essential part of an equipment. Charging steers must be shot at times, lassos must be severed on occasions.

Quite often a stranger would come to a campfire and eat a meal or two. These wayfarers, the Kid observed, were always treated courteously. He wondered at this and mentioned it to Tall Tim.

"These wanderers usually are hiding out from State Rangers, soldiers from the nearest post, or are bein' chased by sheriffs," the latter explained, "Many of them was in the war and learned to hold life mighty cheap. Slater always is as perlite as old pie to them. For if they git their dander up ag'in an outfit they can do more damage in causin' one stampede than a year of free grub would pay for. If anyone

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comes lookin' for any man who's fed with us, you just remember you never saw any such animal. Sometimes they throw in with us and will do mighty good work for a spell. Then they're off to rob a stage, or hold up some small settlement. They just can't seem to help bein' playful with other folks' property. We have enough to bother with protectin' our cattle an' stock without gittin' Texas bad men mad at us."

IT WAS shortly after this conversation that the Kid noticed how the campfire talk usually pivoted on the wild doings of John Wesley Hardin, Ben Thompson, or King Fisher, or other notable gunmen.

Shortly after the episode of the snake, and while they were riding the brush and collecting wild cattle the Kid was impressed by the deference paid to a certain visitor. He was an American, although he wore a gay Mexican sash and a richly embroidered short jacket. He was armed with two ivory handled revolvers.

After he had eaten, Langty civilly told him that the Rangers were combing the country a few miles to the south.

"Always looking for someone. That's their job," lazily said the guest. He talked aside with Pecos before riding north that afternoon.

The next morning the outfit left the corral with the decoy herd before sunrise, with Langty leading the way through the chaparral and mesquite. After advancing a mile Langty ordered two men to stay with the herd in a dense growth of brush and motioned for the others to follow him. The Kid rode last in the line. There sounded a crashing noise ahead and instantly every man was riding madly. The Kid had no idea what it all was about, but his pony knew his work as a cowcatcher, and dashed forward indifferent to timber and brush. The Kid was kept busy ducking under low hanging limbs and guarding his face against the whiplike strokes of smaller branches. The pony jumped small patches of prickly-pear and smashed through the larger patches. He had been turned into a demon of activity by the sound of the wild steer Langty's advance had stirred into flight. He squatted low and plunged under a thick oak limb. The Kid almost dropped under his neck to avoid the limb and was knocked unconscious from his saddle. When he opened his eyes he heard men talking in the brush on the other side of the live-oak.

"Then it's tomorrow," said one. The voice reminded him of the stranger who had ridden north.

"Then, or not at all on this trip," said a second voice. "The Lower Road is safer."

They talked no more, but the Kid could hear their horses moving in opposite directions. He had intended to call out to them, for he doubted his ability to find any of his companions. Shame at having lost his sense of direction stilled his tongue. As he stood and pondered which way to take, Langty came through the brush, riding slowly and humming the "Texas Lullaby," a tune without words but believed to have a very soothing effect on wild cattle. Behind him and strung out in a long line came the decoy herd, mixed with which were quite a number of wild cattle. His face went livid with rage as he beheld the Kid.

"Up into that oak, you fool! If you stampede them I'll cut your throat," he growled. And then he was humming the lullaby.

THE Kid scrambled into the oak and froze against the trunk. In the rear and on the flanks of the cattle sounded other voices crooning softly. The cattle passed close to the tree. He knew all had passed when Tall Tim came along, leading his pony. The Kid slid down from the tree and for a few moments it looked as if Tim must release the led-horse, or be thrown. The Kid seized the rope and managed to swing himself into the saddle, however. Tim snapped his rope clear and in whispers threatened the Kid with several horrible fates, and then was softly singing the lullaby again. Langty led the way to the big corral, some five miles from the ranch-house; led the head of the long file in between the stoutly built wings, while the waddies rode wide on each side

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to prevent any stragglers from escaping. After the herd was secured Tall Tim rode up to the Kid.

"What gum-game you prepond you was up to by shinnin' down that tree'n startin' the hosses to actin' up?" he demanded. "Didn't you have brains enough to know they might a-skeered the herd and made 'em stampede?"

The Kid contritely explained his dilemma and described his accident. Tall Tim felt of his head and found a big bruise. "You sure got a tunk, Kid. It's all right between us now, but I was mad when I see you a-hootin' out of that tree. Reckoned the whole herd would pile up on top of Langty."

"I'll know better next time, Tim. Now tell me something. What's going to happen tomorrow?"

"Happen tomorrow? Good land, how should I know? But you can gamble lots will happen every tomorrer when you're out in the brush. Mebbe the world is comin' to an end. Why'd you put that fool question?"

"Just wondering. Sort of thinking. When do we return to the ranch?"

"Day after tomorrer if we're lucky enough to pick up enough catttle on tomorrer's roundup."

"What's the name of the man who wore the pretty sash and rode away right after grub?"

"You're tryin' to make me ruin my singin' voice. Name's Cæsar. Calls himself that, anyway. Prob'ly real name's 'John Smith.' American all right, an' a most fancy gun-slinger."

"One more question, Tim. How can a man make money by being a gun-fighter?"

"Well, of all the loco-kids! He has to be a gun-fighter to carry on his business. But they'll git him sometime."

"Who's 'they'?"

"Rangers, soldiers, peace-officers. Anyone who happens to hone for to git him. Now shut up."

"Just one more, please, Tim. What's his business?"

"Ding bust your young hide! He lives by takin' what he wants. Now will you close your yap?"

"Yes sir. Would he take cattle?"

"From his poor father, or from his poor, weak old grandpap. That's why we feed him'n treat him perlite, an' tell where the Rangers are workin'. So he won't take ours."

"Thanks. Now I'm going to find Manuel and have him dig the thorns out of my shoulders. There aren't any more prickly pears in Texas. I've collected all the prickers. I must be all right for tomorrow."

"You'll be all right," assured Tim; and he grinned broadly. "You'll be right here."

"Can we catch cattle here?"

"You sure are one prime, young shorthorn. Don't you know these critters are too wild to graze out here in the open except at night? Daytime they keep in the brush, heads to the ground, listenin'. Deer, nor buff'ler, isn't any wilder. Tomorrer we're goin' into the brush to tail 'em down. But you'll stay right here."

The Kid stared his ignorance. Tim further explained, "We're makin' up a herd to drive north. Old man wants the best he can git to stand the drive. You can't go with us as tailin'-down is a dod-rotted sight harder than what we did today."

He ceased talking as Langty came up. The foreman told him, "See that the Kid has his tie-ropes ready for tomorrow, Tim."

"You mean he's goin' along with us?" asked Tim in great surprise.

"Can he learn how to tail-down by loafing in camp?" curtly replied Langty.

As the foreman rode on, Tim's weathered face was sober. Then his reckless features relaxed and he laughed silently until his eyes were wet. Red Dick lounged up and complained, "I don't *sabe*, you big idiot."

"Kid's goin' to tail-down tomorrer," gasped Tim.

Dick's ready smile expanded into a broad grin. "Kid," he kindly advised, "it ain't

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hard if you gentle 'em and git their confidence. A Texas steer will do anything for you if he trusts you." The Kid was worried when he rolled in his blanket that night.

IN THE morning, with Tim acting as interpreter, he managed to explain to Manuel his entire ignorance as to tailing-down, or the technique of "tying-down." Manuel leaped on his horse and sped for a steer just turned out of the corral to be shot for the kettle. The steer made for the brush. Manuel quickly overtook him. He caught the tail in his right hand and took a quick turn around the saddle horn, and jumped his horse violently ahead, and caused the steer to turn a somersault. The horse immediately came to a stop, and Manuel as quickly leaped to the ground and with marvelous celerity hog-tied the stunned animal with the short tie-ropes he carried in his belt.

"I couldn't do that in a million years," gasped the Kid. "I couldn't do that if the steer was dead."

"You'll do that inside of three days, or get out," spoke up Langty behind him.

"Then I'll do it if I get killed," declared the Kid.

"If a critter gits up while you're on the ground, an' afore you can tie him you'll be rubbed out most sartain," gravely said Tim. After Langty passed on he advised the Kid, "You stick along with me, or Dick, or Manuel. I never dreamed you really was goin' with us. Langty ought to give you a chance to practice it in the open with some of us *hombres* stickin' 'round to rope the critter if he come to his senses afore you'd tied the ropes. But of course you must l'arn sometime before you can be a real waddie. Remember this: if you git separated from us in the brush and scare up a steer, you keep up a 'lowin' sound, like a cow. If any of the boys are near they'll try to give you a hand. If you hear any 'lowin', an' ain't busy you want to stand by to lend a hand. And you'll hear lots of 'lowin'. Means the boys need help, or are free to give help."

Langty was soon leading the way into the brush, where the men scattered. Within

two miles of the corral the jungle country suddenly became alive with the crashing of cattle, the continuous "lowing" of the waddies, the hoarse orders of Langty, the bellowing of the bulls and the bawling of the calves. So thick was the growth that a man could be close by a mate and not see him unless both happened to be in one of the narrow, winding trails. White-tailed deer silently sped away from the pandemonium. Handsome leopard-cats, known as jaguars, sought refuge in the tops of the tallest trees, and a drove of muskhogs, or peccaries, charged across the wooded arena squealing threats to every living thing.

The Kid's pony, quick as a cat when going into action, squatted low and passed under a limb and scraped the Kid from the saddle before he knew what had happened. The Kid was about to make one end of his lasso fast to the saddle horn when he was thrown to the ground. He remained as he had landed, in a sitting posture, his coiled rope still in his hands. He wondered what he should do next. To lose his mount twice within two days would probably mean his discharge. The confusion continued, and he decided he was fairly well situated as he was. So he crouched in the edge of a thicket and waited for a friend to come his way. Minutes passed, and the crashing sounds lessened, although from all sides the "lowing" of the cowboys could plainly be heard. A branch cracked on the opposite side of his thicket. The Kid noiselessly came to his knees and wondered whether it was a steer, a black bear, jaguar, or puma. He knew it was neither a pony, or a steer. Then, in the opposite direction, came a more decisive sound, of something approaching at break-neck speed through the brush. A three-year-old bull shot into view for a moment to pass within a few feet of him. Riding as if a part of his mount came Manuel to flash across the small

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opening. The Kid came to his feet to watch the chase, while from the opposite side of the thicket suddenly emerged the head and shoulders of a Comanche. The Indian was drawing an arrow to the head to shoot at the Mexican.

REACTING mechanically the Kid flirted the noose over the savage's head and gave the rope a violent yank. The arrow flew high. In a flash Manuel had pivoted about and re-entered the opening. One glance from his quick eyes told him the story. He swerved to the Kid's side and snatched the rope from his hand and gave it a turn around the saddle-horn. Then followed the gruesome spectacle of a naked savage being dragged and yanked through the brush.

The Kid was squatting by the thicket when Manuel came back. The Mexican's white teeth flashed in a smile. He dismounted and patted the Kid's shoulder and returned the lasso and repeated, "Good, good."

Langty dashed along the narrow path and spied the two. He yelled to the Kid, "What'n hell you mean by takin' a rest? Think this is a picnic? How many cows you tied down? Not a one. You was blamed good'n scared. You let your hoss loose."

Before the Kid could interpose any denial the Mexican was speaking vehemently in Spanish. By the time he had finished the foreman's ferocity vanished. To the Kid he said, "You killed a sneaking Comanche, eh? Well, we'll have to say that lets you out this time." He wheeled and was off to send men to the corral to bring back some "gentle" cattle which would be thrown and necked to the wild captives with short ropes. One of the men had caught the Kid's mount. Soon the entire outfit knew how he had saved Manuel's life by roping a Comanche. Tim and Dick were jealous and swore terrifically, and all the while they pounded him on the back to express their approval and admiration.

But every thought was changed when Pecos came, quirting his horse at every jump, to announce that thieves had raided the corral and had driven away some two hundred head of cattle.

"Damnation!" screamed Langty. "That bunch's worth three thousand dollars north of the Injun Nation. Done right under our eyes. Dead Comanche was a spy on us while his friends turned the trick. Only a Comanche could have done it! Everyone for the corral!"

The Kid rode alongside of Tall Tim and asked, "What's the Lower Road?"

"None of your blamed business. This ain't no time to learn jography. It's the Old Presidio del Rio Grande road. The new road's called the 'Upper'."

"I believe the cattle are being driven to that. Stop your cursing. Slow down and listen so I won't have to shout it." Then he told Tim about the brief conversation he had heard in the brush after being knocked from the saddle. In conclusion he said, "One was the man you call Cæsar. The other said the Lower Road would be safer."

"The t'other one?" snapped Tim.

"I'm not absolutely sure; so I don't dare say. You know all I know."

"Keep shut. You don't know nothin' 'bout nothin'. Remember."

With that Tim jumped his horse ahead and passed a word to several of the men.

As they fell in behind him Langty yelled, "Where you men a-riding to? On the corral to pick up the trail?"

Tall Tim shouted back, "I reckon I've found that trail, Langty. They're makin' for the Lower Road, an' we'll git there ahead of 'em. Kid, go back to camp."

Early next morning Tim rode into camp. He was dog-tired and fell, rather than slipped, from the saddle. He was wearing a Mexican sash and through it were thrust two ivory-handled revolvers. As Langty came up to him, his eyes glaring at the sash and weapons, Tim wearily explained.

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"The boys are fetchin' back the herd. Cæsar was with the outfit. He's ridin' wide'n handsome now."

"Dead!" cried Langty.

"He'll never be deader, Langty. T'others were scrubs. They bolted at sight of us. Cæsar stuck to give us a run for the steers. I shot him."

"You should a-taken him alive to make him talk."

"He talked some when passing out. Sounded sort of foolish. He mentioned your name. Said somebody had cold-decked him."

Chapter III

In the Back Pastures

THE recovery of the stolen cattle was not talked about. The Kid soon discovered that if he mentioned the raid a blanket of silence would fall over his garrulous mates. Nor did Tim wear Cæsar's ivory-handled guns. The Kid's curiosity was almost insatiable and he persisted in cross-examining Tim when he could find him alone. "How did you do it? Where are the guns?" he eagerly asked.

Tim stared at him blankly, then seized him by the shoulders and shook him and said, "Wake up! You've been sleepin' when you oughter be workin'."

"But I heard you tell Langty that Cæsar mentioned his name," the Kid persisted.

"Sure he mentioned Langty's name. Mentioned the old man's name. Said he was sorry to abuse men after eating their grub. Forget about it."

But the Kid was not satisfied, although he held his tongue. When he saw Slater talking apart with Langty, and observed the old man's brows were furrowed with new lines, he wondered if the unsuccessful raid was not the cause. Langty, too, seemed to be changed. He went about his work with grim face and talked to the men only to give orders. The Kid whispered to Red Dick about it.

"Crazy in the head like a loco-steer," growled Dick. "You'll be writing a dime novel if you ain't careful."

The Kid was glad to learn he was to participate in more work away from the home-ranch. The old man gave an order for the roundup of the big pastures from the forks of the Nueces and the Frio to the heads of those streams, and as far to the west as the old Cotullo Ranch, midway between Laredo and San Antonio. Different camps of cowboys in Slater's employ, and unknown to the Kid, came to the home-ranch for final instructions and tarried two days and then vanished into the brush, each small outfit having been assigned to some pasture which was as large as two or more townships.

The Kid was pleased to learn he was to ride with Tim and Dick. Their hunting ground, he learned, comprised a wild terrain of a hundred miles square. Nearly ninety per cent of the entire outfit was made up of Mexicans, descendants of those *vaqueros* who branded three crosses on the horses and cattle brought to the new world by Cortez. As each outfit rode away Slater called out, "I don't want no critters that ain't fit to be road-branded."

"We oughter git a whack at the buf'ler 'tween the heads of the rivers," Tall Tim told the Kid. "They never graze down in this brush country. We roll out tomorrer."

"Heard anything about Sinful Plunkett?"

"You still harpin' on that? You won't git cookies next time. Life's a rope'n always gittin' twisted up. Plunkett was with the Slaters for years, but he had to cut up bad. Just pure cussedness. It hurts the old man."

SLATER was much changed. His face was more drawn and haggard. He carried out the details of each day's work with the bowie-knife in his boot and the heavy belt of Henry rifle cartridges dragging at his hips. But his mind often strayed from cattle to follow the man he had befriended.

Harker, the refugee, an excellent brush-popper when not taking time off to indulge in some deviltry, came along and told the Kid, "You're ridin' with me'n Manuel out to the decoy herd to fetch in what's left there. We're startin' pronto."

After Harker had gone on Tall Tim

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mused, "Some one who wants him will find him one of these days. But he's a prime cow-catcher."

"Just what has he done that's against the law?"

"None of your business! Just what ain't he done? But it's good business to keep him here when he's takin' a vacation from stage-robbin'n such didoes. You'll be back afore we roll out. If you ain't you can just tag along'n catch up with us."

This was a large order for one who had not been more than a dozen miles from the home-ranch. The "pasture" was a wild country, a tenth of the size of Rhode Island. Before the Kid could express any doubt as to his ability as a trailer Tim added, "If we wa'n't goin' to fetch the herd out one man would be enough to git 'em together. I've worked it alone twice."

The Kid smiled sweetly and said nothing. Roping out a horse he mounted and rode after Harker and Manuel. The five miles to the decoy herd were soon covered. Three Mexican youths, smoking black navy plug tobacco, rolled fine for the eternal corn-husk cigarettes, were herding the cattle. The herd had been taken back and forth between the corral and the ranch, too many times to present a difficult problem. Harker was excellent at the work and Manuel was a master.

The herd was driven into the trail and headed for the ranch. Harker rode ahead, monotonously singing the lullaby. The Kid brought up the rear. All went smoothly for the first mile; then some musk-hogs cut across the trail near the rear of the herd, and a young bull took fright and bolted. Instantly the Kid's pony was after it before the Kid fully realized what had happened. Manuel and the Mexican youths held the rest of the herd to the trail.

Just inside the brush the Kid roped the runaway and brought him crashing to earth. Loosing his rope he waved his hat and yelled to drive the animal back into the open. But the black bull had much guile. He dodged and feinted and then dashed deeper into the growth. The Kid had no tie-ropes but he believed he could use the lasso, and with this faith he let his pony go. Like a streak the pony soon carried him alongside of the bull. The Kid seized the tail and gave it a turn around the saddle-horn and the pony leaped ahead. The bull performed a beautiful somersault and remained quiescent. The Kid dismounted and used his lasso.

As he rose and rubbed the sweat from his face he detected a slight motion behind some Spanish bayonet. Leaping onto his pony and pulling a gun he rode around the cover and was in time to see a man about to mount a mouse-colored mustang. Long white hair fell to the man's shoulders. As he turned his head to peer into the muzzle of the Kid's gun the latter was thrilled to behold the bushiest and whitest whiskers he had ever seen, with one exception.

Riding close he reached down with his free hand and plucked a gun from the man's hip. Then he ordered, "Into that saddle and ride ahead of me."

"You young hellion! What do you mean? This is a free country!" roared the captive.

"I mean we've met twice and this time you're not pulling out."

"Never laid an eye on you afore!"

"You tried to enter my room to rob me, in San 'Tone."

"Judas Priest! So it was you who kicked me in the face'n nearly busted my old neck? An' I reckoned it was that old devil, Tom Slater."

"You must be Sinful Plunkett!" gasped the Kid.

"I'm Roscoe J. Plunkett. T'other name was given by my enemies. What you 'low to do with me?"

"Take you to the Slater ranch."

"Good. That was where I was aimin' for. I want to have a talk with that old hound afore he can shoot me. Thought he was in the room over the gun-store. Saw him enter the store. I climbed up to catch him asleep so's I could make him listen to the truth."

"All right. That's fine. Ride on. You know the way."

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"Damn his old hide! Said I was runin' off his cattle. Wouldn't give me a chance to tell who was doin' it."

"I am not interested in that," said the Kid. "He wants you. I must take you to him."

"You're plumb full of loco weed! But who cares, if you can keep him from shootin' me on sight, like what he promised. I just want a chance to open that old longhorn's eyes."

THE two overtook the herd and the Kid told Manuel about the bull. Manuel ordered two of the boys to go back. They quickly cut out a steer and turned back to neck the animal to the bull and bring the two along to the ranch. Manuel stared curiously at the old man but asked no questions. Harker, riding in advance of the herd, knew nothing of what had transpired.

When the ranch was reached the Kid gave the word to his willing captive, and circled wide and galloped to the house. Slater came to the door, and after one glance at Plunkett he yelled like a Comanche, and bounded from the doorway like a rubber ball, his frosty eyes emitting sparks.

The Kid stepped between the two men and excitedly said, "He's my prisoner; not yours. I found him and fetched him here. He's to have a chance to talk."

"That's all I ask, Tommy, just a chance to talk. How's Linnie these days?"

Ignoring the captive for the moment Slater said to the Kid, "Damn your young nerve! You'll tell Tom Slater what he'll not do?"

"You flea-bitten old rat! I was coming here to git the drop on you, an' to make you listen to reason," bawled Plunkett. "I reckoned I'd trailed you to a room in San 'Tone, but climbed up to the wrong winder an' was lambasted most cruel over the head. This younker said I was to have a chance to tell you what once before I tried to jam through your thick head."

Slater filled his lungs and opened his mouth for a fresh, and overwhelming tirade. Mrs. Slater came to the door, her eyes wide with amazement. "So it's you, is it, Sinful? I can't say I'm glad to see you."

"Hullo, Linnie," cheerfully greeted Sinful. "I've traveled some since I quit here, but this place will always be home to me."

Slater made inarticulate sounds in his throat. The Kid eagerly explained, "I've fetched him here, Ma'am, so's he can have a talk with Mr. Slater."

"Tommy, before you speak a word you remember I'm here, a-hearing. You be careful," warned Mrs. Slater.

"I've missed your cooking a heap, Linnie. Fair sick at times for some of your biscuit," said Sinful.

"You shut up!" roared Slater. "I've looked high'n low for you. You want to talk, eh? Well, you shall talk, but don't think I'll ever forgive you. Linnie says I can't kill you unless you try that game again. An' you're goin' to move on mighty soon or you won't have a chance."

"Forgiveness, you old horned toad? Forgiveness from me to you if I can fetch myself to give it."

SLATER turned away and looked out over the brush country, where he had come to make his home and fortune. He had seen many tragedies and had endured many perils. He had suffered deeply when his friend of many years had been guilty, as he firmly believed, of stealing his cattle. The Kid broke the gloomy reverie by politely asking, "Can't I go north with the trail-herd, sir?"

"No! Shut up! Go to the devil!" shouted the old man.

"That's the trouble with you, Tommy. You won't let anyone speak," said Plunkett.

The Kid essayed to soften the old man's temper by remarking, "'I never can believe that Mr. Plunkett ever ran off with any of your cattle."

"There speaks a babe in pearls of wisdom," murmured Sinful.

The old man slowly swung about and

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glared wrathfully at the Kid. When he could speak it was to say, "Git out in the mornin'. You're through here. Keep goin'. God give you rest if ever I set eyes on you again. If ever——"

"Thomas G. Slater, that is enough," warned Mrs. Slater from inside the kitchen door. "Have your talk with Sinful, but let that child alone."

"My own wife turns ag'in me. Can't even cuss out a young whelp."

"If you'd listened to me back along," began Plunkett, "I could straightened out the whole mess." Then turning to the door he cheerfully called out, "I'll yet make him see the light, Linnie."

"You must make me see the light, too," she gravely called back.

"It's always darkest just before dawn, Linnie. I struck a trail in San 'Tone that led me to the truth about the stolen cattle. Now it's led me here."

"To steal more cattle," fiercely broke in Slater.

"Then I can go with the road-herd, sir?" anxiously asked the Kid.

"Go to hell. No you can't go. Go'n git yourself killed in the Nueces pastures. But if you didn't run off them steers, Sinful, who did?"

"What I've got to tell is for you'n Linnie alone."

The Kid felt this reflected on his integrity. He dared the old man's anger by saying, "Somewhere out in the back pastures we'll find out who's running off with the cattle, sir. Cæsar was in it, but he had help from the inside, help from close to the ranch-house. Mr. Plunkett wasn't here to give any help. Tim and Red are canny. They know more'n they've told. And you can't make them tell what they believe until they can produce proof. The answer that's bothering you is to be found out between the forks and heads of the Nueces and the Frio. If I find the thieves can I go north with the herd?"

"Damnation, yes! When you find the thieves. And not before. One of 'em is close by now, or I'll eat my hat."

Sinful Plunkett overlooked the slur on his honor, and murmured, "The younker has brains. He knows you've lost more cattle since you drove me away than while I was here to keep an eagle eye on things."

Mrs. Slater stepped into view, her strong hands resting on her hips. She sternly said, "I stand by my man, Sinful. If you've got anything to say you spit it out."

"Didn't reckon you wanted all the waddies to know about it. I thought this younker worked here. But it seems he's one of the fambly."

Slater suddenly realized that the Kid was prolonging his visit. He sharply asked, "Hi, Shorthorn! What you waitin' for? Want me to gather you up in my arms'n kiss you? Be you workin' here, or just visitin'?"

"I can take a hint, sir," haughtily answered the Kid. And he hurried off to find Tim and Dick and tell them the news of Plunkett's voluntary return.

After the two waddies had profanely questioned him the Kid eagerly announced, "I'm going north with the trail-herd. The boss is fussed up about cattle-thieves. He was stubborn at first, and I had to be firm with him. But I stuck to it, and he said I could go if I found who's been running off the cattle."

"As easy as that!" gasped Tall Tim. "If you ain't the 'riginal, stingin' cactus! All he's got to do, Red, is to mosey out to the forks of the Nueces and learn the names of the stealers."

"Kid, you keep your mouth shut, or you'll be diggin' your grave with your tongue. Your free'n easy way of talk will sure fetch a bullet to your bosom if some I won't call by name happen to hear you."

"Already he's 'bout as welcome to me as a man who snores," said Tim. The Kid did not appreciate the significance of this speech, but he was to understand it fully.

IN MAKING up the several outfits for the back pastures, Langty named Tim, Dick, the Kid and Harker as co-workers, with their headquarters on Deer Creek near the forks of the Frio. Tall Tim and Dick were elated over their territory as

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both had worked it before many times.

The four waddies packed out supplies and made their camp, and for the first time the Kid learned what hard work was. Each man went out by himself as a rule, tying-down, or using gentle cattle as decoys. Each man needed a wild animal's sense of direction in order to return to where he had thrown and tied cow, or bull. There was no resting; and once a bunch of cattle was collected the Kid learned the first precept from the cowboy's Bible —to stick with the herd under all conditions and through all perils. Stampedes, northers, Indians, or whatnot, he must stick by the herd even as a captain stays by his ship. It was gruelling, heart-breaking work, but the Kid learned more about cattle during his first week in the back pastures than he would have picked up in half a year around the home ranch. It developed his self-reliance a hundred per cent. And there came a time when after each dangerous day he could find a deep satisfaction in the simple realization that he still lived. There were days when he saw none of his mates, and did not know that he ever would see them.

Then the routine of brush-popping was discordantly interrupted by Harker riding into the creek camp and announcing the discovery of a large band of Indians. Whether they were Lipan Apaches, or Comanches, he could not tell. Red Dick, just arrived at camp, was worried about Tall Tim. He would have set forth to find him had he had any idea where to look. But that evening Tim came in.

"Now we're all together," said Harker, "we'll stick together till this red scare is over."

"We'll start out in the mornin' to fetch back a bunch of prime steers ten miles southwest of here," said Tim. "We'll bed-down away from this camp." This was the ordinary practice when anticipating a volley of arrows, or lead, in the darkness.

"Kid can bed-down near Harker," said Red Dick.

"Why?" asked Harker.

"You snore, Harker."

"You've said that over'n over. But I know I don't."

"Man never hears himself snore. Has to take someone's word for it," said Tim. "But you're a prime snorer."

"If he is why should I sleep near him?" asked the Kid.

"You won't sleep much. You'll have to stand guard while he sleeps," said Dick.

"I never snore," insisted Harker. "But the Kid can sleep where he wants to. He won't have to stand no guard."

But Tall Tim was not joking. Harker, a rare cow-catcher, was a curse in time of peril from midnight attacks. He did snore. He advertised his presence to skulkers for a considerable distance.

AFTER eating their supper the four men separated, each drawing back from the camp. Harker was soon asleep and his snoring carried far on the night air. The Kid, fifty feet from him, gripped a revolver and remained awake. Toward morning sleep overcame him.

When he awoke it was to find breakfast was ready and Harker was indignantly denying that he ever snored. Before the argument got well started the men were surprised to behold Manuel riding toward them. He was supposed to be stationed some twenty miles to the south.

Under his breath Harker muttered, "The damn greaser!"

The Kid overheard him and coldly said, "Manuel is a friend of mine."

"Well, what of it? Who be you, anyway?" said Harker.

"Quit it, Harker!" barked Tall Tim. "Back pasture rules; no quarrelin'. You do snore. You snore to beat hell. Manuel happens to be my friend, too. After we git back to the ranch you try to take it out of my hide if you don't like my talk." With that he came to his feet and waved greeting to Manuel and called out a few words in Spanish.

"Talk United States so we can all *sabe* it," said Harker.

Manuel gestured and spoke in his native tongue. Tall Tim interpreted, "He says he came across a trail of five men. Can't say if they was Injuns, or whites, but thinks they was whites."

"Whites out in this God-forsaken country less they be from our outfit? I told

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you I ran across Injun signs," said Harker.

"I was simply repeating what Manuel said."

"Whites or reds, they don't belong with us," said Red Dick. "Tim'n me will pick up our bunch. You folks pick up what you can."

Manuel was agreeable to this. Harker believed all should stay together until the Indians attacked or left the country. Nor could he understand how Manuel came to be so far north. Tim put the question to Manuel who replied that his outfit had progressed so far with its work as not to need him, and that he came north to lend a hand where it was most needed.

"He ain't needed here," said Harker.

"But he can't leave with Indians around to catch him and kill him," protested the Kid.

"No Injuns is goin' catch our Manuel, Shorthorn," assured Tim. "We'll do what Dick said."

Tim and Dick saddled and rode toward the southwest. Harker was for riding north. Manuel smiled and pointed to the west. The Kid cast the deciding vote, by saying, "I ain't keen to meet any Indians, but we've combed the country to the north and we must look for cattle where we can find them. I'm for the west."

"You'll wish you'd gone north when you find yourself hangin' head down over a Lipan fire," warned Harker.

AS THEY were mounting Manuel caught the Kid's eyes and with a quick gesture motioned for him to hold back. The Kid was puzzled, but he did fuss with his saddle rigging so that the two got some distance ahead. He felt an urge to overtake them, but the Mexican, slightly in the rear of Harker, motioned with his hand behind his back for him to keep back. It was all very bewildering. When the two came to an opening of some fifty acres the Kid cut down the distance. On the western hem of the opening cattle were feeding. The Kid was within two rods of his mates when to his horror and amazement Harker jerked out a gun and fired at the Mexican an instant after the latter had gone over the side of his pony with the quickness of a Comanche.

Manuel fired from under his pony's neck as he rode in a wide circle around the would-be assassin. The Kid halted outside the circle described by the Mexican, his revolver half raised. But he could not bring himself to shoot at Harker as yet. He was mystified and greatly troubled. It appeared to be a private grudge between the two men.

Harker emptied his gun and started to reload. Instantly the Mexican was racing toward him, now sitting erect and swinging his rope. Harker lifted his mount into a mad gallop and started across the plain, still striving to reload. He was succeeding and had turned to grin vindictively at his pursuer when his pony stumbled. In saving himself from being thrown he lost his gun. With a shrill scream the Mexican closed in. Harker spurred his pony at top speed and commenced circling in an endeavor to get behind his adversary. Now both were whirling their lassoes. The Kid halted and watched with bated breath. It was the first time he had seen two men fight a duel with lassoes.

Harker, desperate, once he saw he could not get his man before him, wheeled and raced to meet his adversary head on. Just as the Kid believed the two ponies must crash the Mexican's mount veered sharply, and the long rope of green hide uncoiled like a monster snake making a spring. Almost at the same instant Harker made a hurried cast, which fell short. Harker went over the side of his pony and escaped the noose. Then it became a race as to which should coil and cast again. The Mexican was vastly quicker in this defensive maneuver. He snapped the rope back and was swinging his arm just as Harker commenced coiling. Harker ducked but the deadly noose dropped over his head. He went for his knife and snatched it clear of the scabbard, but he should have had the knife clear from the start. Before the

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brain could more than telegraph the order for the hand to sever the tough rope he was yanked violently from the saddle.

"Look out!" screamed the Kid. For from the edge of the growth was erupting several hundred head of longhorns. White men were riding on their flanks and shooting at something in the rear.

MANUEL gave but a glance, and then was racing toward the Kid and shooting back at the white men. The Kid spurred his mount toward the brush, nonplussed by Manuel's maneuver. The Mexican screamed for him to shoot, for his skill with a gun was far below his skill with a rope. It was the sight of Red Dick's fiery mop and the lanky figure of Tall Tim breaking into the open, firing at the white men, which gave the Kid his cue. Tim's and Dick's enemies were his enemies. To further decide him as to the proper course of action two of the white men now forged ahead of the stampede and commenced firing at him. Satisfied he was out of the path of the charging cattle he reined in and yanked out a gun and knocked a man from his saddle. Now he had time to see there were five of them, four still being mounted.

He was paralyzed for a few seconds to recognize Langty riding at him, a gun in each hand. Both weapons began exploding. He heard the shrill voice of the lead streaming by his head. He brought down a forty-five and shot Langty through the body. Like a bag of meal the man went off his pony, dead before he struck the ground. The remaining three fugitives turned to the west, to place the herd between them and Tim and Dick. The Kid emptied his gun at them, and then the herd, a mad torrent of rattling horns was intervening and preventing further marksmanship. Tim and Dick also were cut off from giving further pursuit.

MANUEL spurred forward to head the herd. Tall Tim, his voice almost inarticulate because of dust, oaths and anger, managed to yell out, "Cattle thieves!—Langty was the leader! After the herd! Stick with the herd!"

Three men raced for their lives toward the Mexican border. Four men responded to the cow-waddie's first duty, and stuck

with the herd. It was the herd Tim and Dick had gone to bring to the camp on the creek, but the thieves had anticipated them, believing they would remain in camp or withdraw to the east because of Harker's Indian scare.

Wild as leopard cats, and knowing but one desire, to run until exhausted, the tossing, clashing longhorns raced on. The false foreman and the man who snored were trampled into gruesome ribbons. Manuel rode like a streak to swing the point, or the leaders of the stampede, back and turn it into the herd. The Kid, his pony fresher than the others kept close to the Mexican. He had learned the great lesson of all waddies. It might be necessary to die, but life or death, he must stick with the herd.

ONCE the point entered the brush growth the stampede began to slow up, and Manuel's maneuver commenced to have some effect. Swinging his hat and yelling like a demon the Kid joined the Mexican. The leaders swerved to the left. But always were the two furious figures at their flanks, firing guns and yelling. The leaders, somewhat impeded by the brush, gave more ground. Tall Tim and Red Dick now joined in the work, and the column of plunging cattle was doubled back until the point entered the column, and the men knew the trick was won. A milling mass of cattle took the place of the stampede. Round and round they slowly ran. Immediately the gun-firing and hat-waving and discordant yelling ceased. In its place four voices were raised in the wordless lullaby, monotonous, yet sooth-

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ing. And at a respectable distance four men were slowly riding around the mass of beef, singing and discouraging any straying from the herd. Some of the steers discovered they could graze. Others followed their example. After an hour all were feeding with only intermittent attempts to regain the cover of the brush.

Then Tall Tim slipped from his lathered mount and mopped his streaming face and huskily announced, "With the help of them damned thieves we've fetched our bunch this far. Kid, you light out for the ranch'n tell the old man that Harker'n Langty was caught runnin' off his cattle. If his head's workin' he'll *sabe* it was the same buzzards who've been stealin' his critters all along."

"Then the man I heard talking with Cæsar was Langty," gasped the Kid.

"Who'd you s'pose? That it was me, or Dick, or Manuel? Yeah. Dick'n me have know'd all 'bout it after we caught up with Cæsar. He told me quite a bit afore he pulled out for the other shore. I told Langty that Cæsar spoke his name. I wanted him to know he was suspected so he'd get brash'n make a break an' show his hand. That's what he opined to do. Make a break. This was to be his last haul. Tell the old man we'll be fetchin' as likely a bunch of steers he ever clapped a road-brand onto."

THE Kid rode back to camp and secured a fresh mount and took a second along as a relay. When his first mount wearied he shifted to the second, and he made the ranch in record-breaking time. He found Slater and Sinful Plunkett seated in the doorway. As the Kid dashed up to the house and threw himself from his pony the old man came to his feet.

"What you back here for? Quit the herd?" he asked casually.

"I stuck with the herd. The herd's all right, thanks to Tim, Dick, Manuel and me," said the Kid. "Langty and Harker are dead. They were stealing your cattle when we jumped them. They've been stealing from you right along. Cæsar was in it and managed the drive across into Mexico. The boys knew when they went after the herd he stole, with Langty's help." Then he went back to the brief conversation he overheard in the brush and told the whole story.

Sinful Plunkett said softly, "There, damn your old hide. There's the naked truth. It's what I know'd long ago and wanted to tell you. Even after you run me out of Texas I come way back on a chance of catchin' you an' makin' you listen. I tried to bust into what I thought was your room in San 'Tone, allowin' to lay a gun over your head to make you listen. If you knew as much as a horned toad you wouldn't let folks walk away with your bread'n butter. But you're just a poor, igerant old man."

"Just so far, Sinful. Just so far, but a inch farther an' I'll see the inside of your gizzard," panted Slater.

"Just a ornery old horntoad," firmly added Sinful.

The old man wheeled on the Kid and glared at him balefully and said, "What you neighborin' 'round this door for? Ain't you got any work to do?"

"Yes, sir. Just wanted to bring the news and to remind you of your promise. I was to trail north with the next drive if I caught the thieves."

"Prob'ly looked on from a mighty safe distance. You can ride with the trail-herd when I know you did somethin' besides look on. You say Langty's dead. How d'ye know? Who done for him?"

"I did, sir."

"You bodacious little liar! Yeah, you can ride north with the herd when I know you done for Langty." After Tim, Dick and Manuel arrived to tell their story there was no doubt in the old man's mind as to how Langty died. He became quite human and rested a hand on the Kid's shoulder and surrendered. "Report to Robins, my new foreman. You ride with the herd."

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The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

"Tiger Claws" and Frank L. Packard

FRANK L. PACKARD, author of "Tiger Claws," the serial which begins in this issue of SHORT STORIES, is a Canadian, born in Montreal in 1877. (He wrote "Two Stolen Idols" for us, you'll remember.) He says that during his High School days, his imagination was fired by the romance and adventure of an engineer's life as set forth by an "inspired" lecturer he heard at that time. As far as he can remember now, according to the lecturer, an engineer's life was made up of all sorts of jolly adventures, such as laying cables along the floor of the Pacific Ocean —and shooting head hunters in Borneo! He took his degree of Bachelor of Science from McGill University and then took a post-graduate course at the Institute Montefiore in the University of Liege in Belgium. Thereafter he followed the engineering profession for a number of years in America—which to his disillusionment, was a long, long way from the head hunters of North Borneo.

During his university course he had spent his summers, for the sake of practical experience, in pulling engines to pieces and putting them together again in one of the railroad shops of the Canadian Pacific Railway. This started him writing those railroad stories of his which have since been published in two volumes—which stories, by the way, he wrote either in the early hours of the dawn before breakfast, or very late at night, while carrying on his duties as an engineer at the same time. Prior to this Packard had never written anything except a much chaptered novel inspired and indited at the tender age of ten! In his own words, "a gory and bloodthirsty epic which I regret to say when read to my fellow playmates was unanimously pronounced to be *punk!* Hence it was never submitted for publication—and has fortunately been lost in the mire of antiquity!"

The success of Packard's railroad stories led him to give up engineering and to devote himself entirely to writing. He is today the author of many books which, in total, have now reached a sale of over two million copies. Outstanding perhaps amongst these is "The Adventures of Jimmie Dale," which is not only selling as well today as ever, but has been translated into almost every language, and of which even a Braille transcription for the blind has been made. We mention "Jimmie Dale" not only because "Jimmie" is a famous underworld character, but for another and specific reason—"Tiger Claws." Mr. Packard has laid the scene of his new novel for SHORT STORIES—"Tiger Claws"—in the underworld of New York, back in the days of "Jimmie Dale." Those days have changed, but the color and the glamor of the old régime still remain. They are the days, as Packard says, when the Bowery was at its zenith, and the most colorful and romantic spot in all Manhattan. It is a story that ranks with "Jimmie Dale" itself.

Bob Corson Again

BOYS, do yuh remember Bob Corson o' the J C and how he fought with Jim Watson over the ranch an' finally won out? If yuh do yuh'll remember a couple o' lazy rannahans named George Henry Blodgett, and Franklin Alexander Wilcox. Well, I guess yuh won't remember 'em neither, 'cause they never used them monikers. Everybody knew em as Shorty an' Nueces. Well, they're goin' to be with us

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again in the next issue in "Me an' Shorty" by Clarence E. Mulford. Hombres that don't know 'em will be right glad to meet 'em, an' hombres that have met up with 'em already will be honin' to see 'em again. They's two ornery jaspers a-comin' that's tryin' to work Bob Corson for his ranch again; an' they got the sheriff with 'em, an' they're askin' ever' one about two jaspers name o' George Henry Blodgett an' Franklin Alexander Wilcox. But they can't seem to find 'em. All they can find is Nueces an' Shorty ridin' about their business quiet like. An', feller, what that business is! An' when that thar comes to a head, hell shore is a-goin' to pop.

Then they's a bangin', shootin' story of cow rustlin' an' six-guns in a blizzard when young Peter was fightin' fer his ranch. Ernest Haycox wrote it, gents, an' yuh know how good that story's goin' to be. It's called "Sevensticks Gamblers," an' it's in the next issue. "Violence," by Carlysle Graham Raht, is about a waddy who went to pieces after the war. He come back to Arizony with his buddy Doc Westfall, an' it was all the Doc could do to hold Jim in check. Then somethin' happened, an' when yuh read about it, hombres, yuh'll be plumb surprised.

Then they's a story called "Sonny Gets the Sack," by Robert H. Rohde, about a kid cowpuncher who goes an' gets himself a job in a bank. Don't laugh yet, hombres. He shore goes for a right good reason. An' yuh'll learn what that reason is in the next issue of SHORT STORIES.

There's a yarn of four wild Americans in a Chinese river, in the next issue, and it's by an author who's new to our pages. "Private Property" by W. Wirt. You'll like the four fightin' fools in this story; and we guarantee you'll be breathless through the machine-gun battle when the little launch comes up against a river full of Chinese fighting craft.

And plenty more. Lots in the next issue to hold you down in that chair, gents, readin' until yo're plumb from kiver to kiver.

An Idea from the Tropics

HERE'S an interesting letter from the tropics, and it contains an idea worth thinking about.

"For a number of years I have made the tropics my field of action in the many lines of endeavor that I have attempted. And what a field. In no other part of the world has a person the chance to meet and study such a variety of personalities and characters. And in no other part of the world is life disclosed so vividly and primitively with such an utter abandon of the covers of conventionality. Nor will you find such a spirit of democracy elsewhere. To each man is instinctively granted the right to think, speak and believe as he pleases. Fewer criticisms are offered as to a man's actions. He is classified not according to one characteristic, but according to the balance of the total. If the better characteristics outweigh the worse, then he is accepted as better than the average, and vice versa.

"I miss quite a number of SHORT STORIES, even though I am a subscriber. But everyone knows, who has had the experience, the unreliability of the foreign mails; and when you get them through that, and have possibly seven or eight that you are counting on enjoying at the next camp site, I ask you, does it tend to put you in a jolly good humor to see the cargo they were in swept away in a landslide? Hardly. Do your thoughts turn to thankfulness that it was a cargo mule and not yours that was in the direct path? Oh, no, you are used to such things as that, but the loss of the magazines is a blow for which you have no defense.

"Why do you not institute a department advising as to the best adventure books of the month? There is a lot in a title, but I have been quite disappointed many times from that very thing. I wonder if there would not be other readers who would second my suggestion?

"Then for this time I will sign off, hoping that my mail boy brings me a cargo of SHORT STORIES, and wishing that Mr. Greene and others would work overtime so that SHORT STORIES would be compelled to increase the size.

"Sincerely,
"A. ROBERT LEA,
"Columbia,"
"South America."

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SHORT STORIES has considered running items on current adventure books, but the difficulties of such a department have made us hesitate. If we should do it, of course, we should want it to be a comprehensive and useful guide to all our readers. But as we know from long connection with them, different readers have different ideas of what constitutes adventure.

For instance, a travel book that would seem tame to some would be thought mighty exciting by others. Recommending books is a very different business from buying stories for a magazine, because a book is all the same—whereas a magazine may be varied to catch the taste of many.

If such a department were instituted it seems that the best we could do would be to give a brief description of the book, state whether it seems to get over, and warn the reader that his risk isn't removed, only lessened, by our preliminary judgment.

Why don't you let us know what you think of the idea, and how you think such a department should be run?

The Expert Says—

DID you ever see a horse or a cow smoke?" the anti-nicotine people ask. Well, they don't smoke, but they chaw. And sometimes with disastrous effects, too. The only thing to do it seems is to teach the cow critters to chaw without swallerin'.

QUESTION:

Can range critters suffer harm from eating wild tobacco?

Ernest Frank Brace,
Toronto, Ont., Can.

ANSWER: by S. Omar Barker.

Range cattle and horses in the Southwest do poison themselves on tobacco and often die from it. Two kinds of wild tobacco grow on Western and Southwestern stock ranges and when range animals are underfed on account of drouth or other forage shortage, they eat this wild tobacco and the nictotine in it is often fatal to their digestive systems. Sheep suffer as much or more than horses and cattle. Sometimes when the animals get small doses at first they seem to accustom themselves to it and eat much larger doses later without very harmful effect.

These wild tobaccos are annual herbs. Their stalks and foliage are gummy and hairy, they are strong scented and bear greenish white or white flowers.

Native Mexican-Americans cultivate a variety of this wild tobacco, calling it "punche" (poonchay), and smoking it instead of "tobacco de cormercio" (store tobacco). It is very strong but not injurious as a smoke. Wild tobacco's worst effect on the stock is said to be before it has entirely dried, but is somewhat mature.

War on a Far Frontier

IN THIS issue we have a war story of the western front, "Man the Guns," by Don McGrew. Here's a letter about another phase of the war from a young Russian. He tells of the various invasions that tore up his country before the revolution. A lot of folks forget that there was a good-sized war going on in the East while we were hearing most about the fighting on French soil.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

After reading some of the letters in SHORT STORIES about the old West, I thought that I'd tell you something of the old World War in Europe as I happened to be there at that time.

I was only about sixteen then and lived in a small town in Russia called Horochow. I have to admit that it was pretty hard to get along there as there was nothing to work at. My mother and I therefore made many trips to Berlin and on our way back we smuggled in such articles as dye which were not allowed into the provinces of Russia. We got away with it, too, but once we had to stay a night in the coop and we only got away by slipping the jailer some rubles.

When the war started, the Germans entered our town and we were glad to see them for they supplied us with all our needs for only a little glass of schnapps. They did not stay long and after they left we became very uncomfortable, for bombs and bullets began to fill the air, forcing us to take shelter in a cave in the forest where we remained until things quieted down a bit.

I remember how one night a Polish horseman forced his way into our house and ordered me to feed his horse which he led right into our hall. Then he demanded my mother's money which not finding, he took a fancy to the ring she wore. He couldn't remove it so he took out his knife while my mother sat silently staring at him. However, a bugle sounded for a retreat

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and leaving the house, the scoundrel fled. I can never forget it.

Of the lot, the Bolsheviks were the laughing stock. They were dressed in rags, some wearing shoes, others barefooted. Many wore a shoe on one foot and a stocking on the other. However, they only wanted us to share our possessions with them, but we had other ideas. The French soldiers were the most polite and nicest. Some of them even promised to take letters to my father in the United States. They retreated before we could get any further.

After the Armistice news of which did not reach us until some months later, we sailed for the U. S. A. and I admit that I'm satisfied here although I wouldn't mind visiting the old country. Maybe I will.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Miles,
Brooklyn. N. Y.

Calgary Stampede

FOLKS who don't live near a rodeo town often have no idea of the excitement that goes on during the preparation for the show. Here's a letter that was written just before The Calgary Stampede started. It's brief but it gives an idea of the big migration to an affair of this sort. And by working men, too. "Real stuff, no circus performers." Our old friend Guy Weadick who ramrods the Calgary spread and who now and then has appeared in these pages could tell you a lot more. We expect to hear all about it direct from Guy when we stop off in Calgary for a day or so about a week from now.

Anyhow, here's what Mr. Duffy says:

"Calgary is getting all het up over the 'Stampede.' It starts next week and as usual is getting better every year. Buffalo Bill's show in his best days couldn't take a booby prize at the first afternoon's events in our annual affair. It's all real stuff, no circus performers at all at all.

"Right now more than a hundred cowpunchers are mudding it toward the boundary in flivvers and Lincolns from Mexico and every cow state in the U. S. A. Breezy Cox wired in for six of his crowd from Great Falls today and he has flivvered all the way from Arizona this week.

"For just one event, steer decorating, Guy Weadick combed Mexico and Texas for the meanest long-horns he could get and shipped in forty of the roughest critters that could be found. If you take a vacation next year and want to see some real action hit Calgary Stampede week. Bigger and better every year and that's no bull.

Yours truly,

T. J. Duffy,
Calgary, Alberta.

Running Irons

Does the possession of a running iron prove a man a rustler? A while ago Mr. H. A. Woodbury said it did. Now Mr. David L. Read writes in to say it doesn't. What do other readers have to say about it?

I wish to take issue with Mr. H. A. Woodbury. In his story, "Proof," and in his letter in the Story Tellers' Circle he would have one believe that possession of a running iron is proof that the man who carries one is a rustler.

I have punched cows for eighteen years in Arizona and know what I am talking about. If possession of a running iron branded a man a rustler, half the cowmen and cowpunchers in Arizona could be called rustlers, and that is a pretty broad statement.

Technically, it is against the law to carry a running iron on the range in Arizona, but like several other laws which were passed a good many years ago, it is not enforced. I could mention half a dozen stock laws, which, if enforced, would work a hardship on the cattlemen.

A great deal of the Arizona cattle country is rough and mountainous and the cattle in some places get to be as wild as deer. It is impossible to gather and brand every calf on the regular round-ups, and those that are missed (and they will run as high as twenty-five per cent in a rough country) are "range branded," caught and branded wherever they are found, with a running iron.

The most common form of running is made thus: ⌐, from a half inch steel rod, for steel holds heat longer than iron. The most up-to-date ones are made in two pieces, the handle being of half inch pipe with a nut welded in one end and the iron threaded to fit; this handle can be reversed when not in use, which makes it shorter and easier to carry in one's chaps pocket or in a small scabbard fastened to the saddle.

Some big outfits I have worked for keep men riding all winter, branding the "long-ears" they have missed on the round-ups, and then they don't get them all, for there are mavericks two, three, or four years old in the mountains, and that is the way most of the rustling is done nowadays, taking unbranded stuff, sometimes large calves eight or ten months are taken from their mothers, weaned, and then branded.

If anyone desires information about the way cattle are handled, I will be glad to answer any questions.

Yours truly,

David L. Read
Benson, Ariz.

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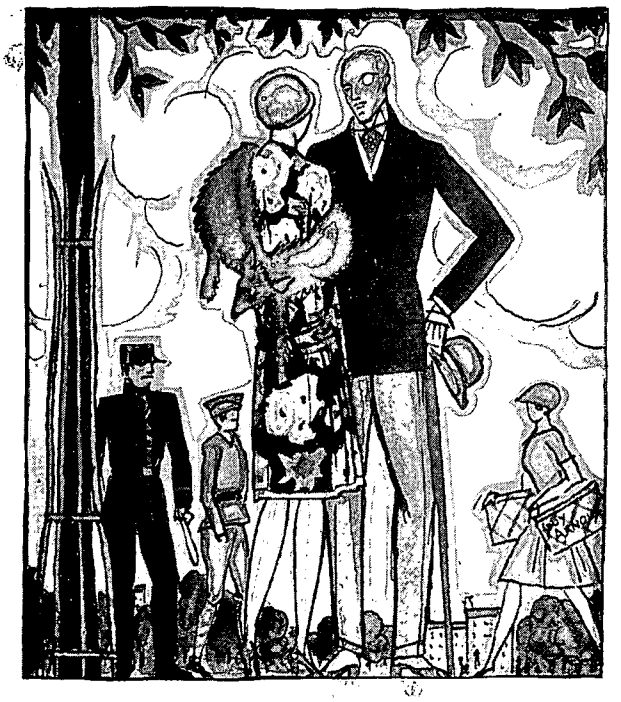
WITHOUT ANY SPARE TIME



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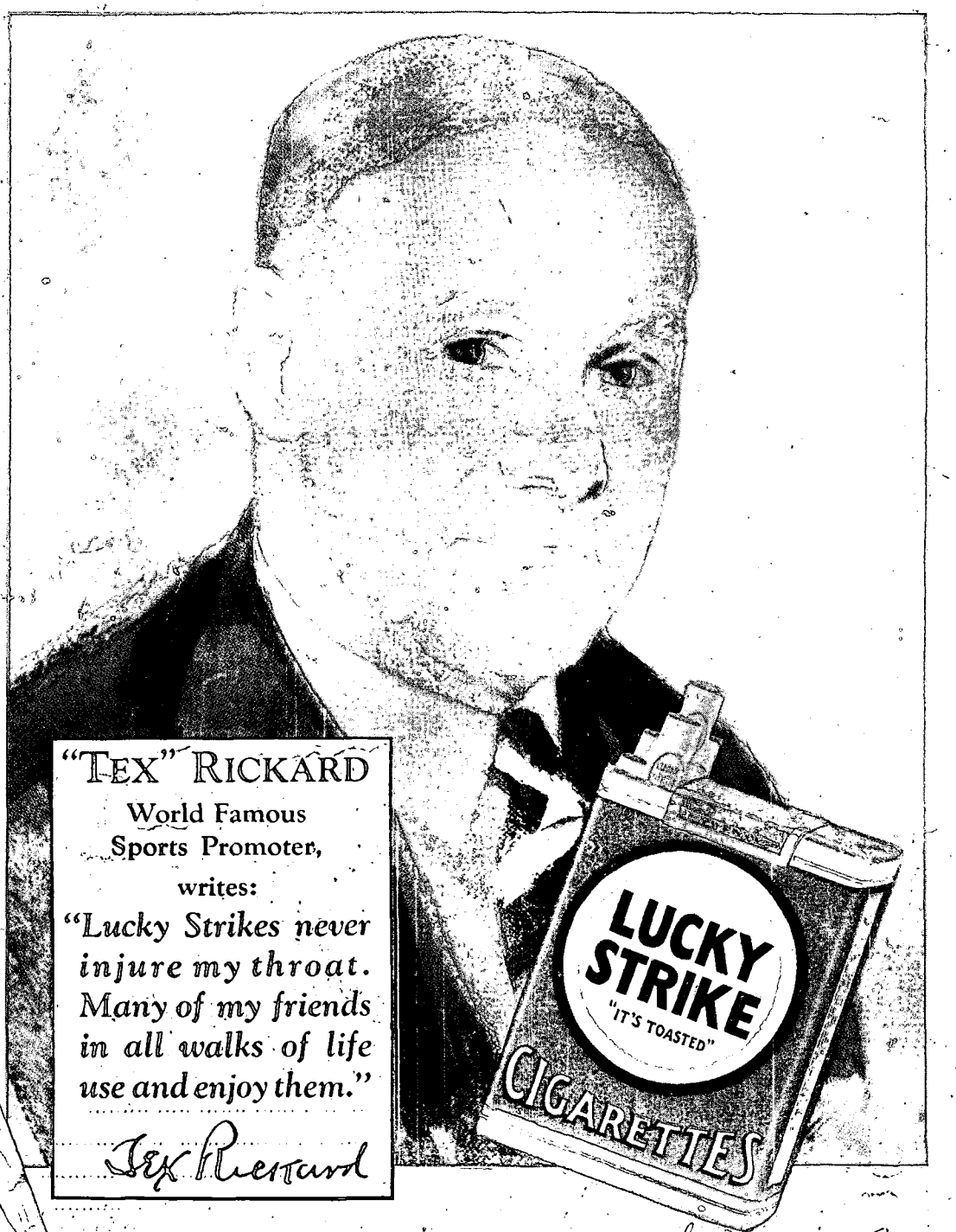

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